TALKING

ROMILA THAPAR

in conversation with

RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

with the participation of

NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA

HISTORY

In a series of candid conversations, Romila Thapar, a widely read, discussed, and cited historian of our times, muses on a range of issues that impact history writing in modern India. Apart from exploring Thapar's far-reaching influence as an authority on the history of early India, *Talking History* examines themes such as the function of a historian, the centrality of historical research and evidence, oriental despotism, the ongoing conflict with religious fundamentalists, and the polymorphous structure of Hinduism. Anecdotal and vibrant, each of these accounts reveals a rare understanding of history as a dialogue between the past and the present.

The latest book in the series of Ramin Jahanbegloo's interviews with prominent intellectuals who have influenced modern Indian thought, *Talking History* traces Romila Thapar's journey as a historian and a public intellectual, and gives an insight into the ideas that have shaped her work.

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Contents

Thinking History in Critical Times ix
Acknowledgements xv

I FROM PANJAB TO LONDON

A Happy Half-way 1
Religions and Storytelling 6
A Secular Environment 11
Talking Politics 15
Following Gandhi 18
Living with the British 26
Reading Novels 30
Discovering the Indian Classics 31
A Nehruvian Ideal 33
A Radical-minded Student 36
Reading Philosophy 40
Living in London in the 1950s 43
Becoming a Historian 56
Return to India 59

Marx and Marxism 62
Teaching at JNU 66

II THE FUNCTION OF THE HISTORIAN

Reading the Past 70
Is There a Pattern in History? 76
What Is a Historical Fact? 79
Objectivity in the Work of a Historian 83
The Sources in History 87
Is History a Single Voice? 89
Is Historical Narrative a Rational System? 92
Historians and Philosophy of History 95
What Is Oral History? 99
What Is Historicity? 103
Which Authority Features in Historical Research? 107
History and the Greeks 112
History and Epic 115

III MODERN WRITING OF EARLY INDIAN HISTORY

The Orientalists and the Utilitarians 126
What Is Oriental Despotism? 130
Kingship or Empire? 132
India without the British 138
Culture of Civilization? 141
The Idea of the Indian Nation 143
Tradition and Culture in India 146

Tradition and Non-violence 148
Going beyond the Blurriness 151
Memory and Forgetfulness 156

IV LINEAGE AND KINGSHIP

Ashoka: Between the Ethical and the Political 163
Ashoka and Gandhi 168
Interpreting Ashoka 172
History and Charismatic Literature 178
Communal Ideologies in India 188
The Role of Archaeology and Anthropology 200
Blood, Kinship, and Lineage 205
History and Political Ideologies 210
The Ideas of Hinduism as Part of Social Functions 219
The Ideologues of Hindu Nationalism 230

V THE HISTORIAN AND THE EPIC

Looking at the Epic 236
The Historicity of the Epic 239
The Two Levels of Temporality 244
Concepts of Time 250
Linearity and Evolution 257
The Heroes and Exile 261
Retaliation and Forgiveness 266
Tragic Drama in India 268

VI *Shakuntala and Somanatha*

The Historian's Impulse 281
Somanatha and Communal Historical Writing 289
The Rashomon Effect 296
The Centrality of the Event 301
Is There an Indian Marxism? 306
New Schools of History Writing 313
Looking at the Past 322

Index 327
About the Authors 339

Thinking History in Critical Times

An intellectual biography of Romila Thapar has been long overdue. Thapar is one of the world's foremost experts on the history of early India. Her multifaceted work, from her early research on *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* to her classic studies on the lineage system in India, her questioning of the dominant paradigms of historians, both from the colonial era and from the more recent nationalist era to more recent reflections on the role of a public intellectual in India, have made her one of the most frequently read, discussed, and cited historians of our time. As such, for more than half a century, Thapar's life has been devoted to the uncovering of the elements of Indian past and their analysis in the context of the present time. In other words, in Professor Thapar's work, past, present, and future are linked together in the endless chain of Indian history. It has been part of her life and work to question the fanatical and dogmatic views of looking at Indian history while recognizing the historical traditions in the early texts of northern India, and criticizing the idea that the civilization in India lacked a sense of history.

History, says Burckhardt, is 'a break with nature caused by the awakening of consciousness'. This work of 'historical consciousness' has always been at the centre of Thapar's historical approach. When, therefore, we study Professor Thapar's analyses of early India, we do not have a sense of historiography as a positivistic science, but that of history as an unending dialogue between the past and the present. As a result, this continuous process of interaction between Thapar the historian and the life and mind of those about whom she writes is not solely a reflection on the historical data or events, but also a way of mirroring today's Indian society—the context in which she thinks and works. We can find a good example of Thapar's historical writing in an essay 'Imagined Religious Communities' where she points out:

> A historically analytical enquiry into the definition and role of religion and the concept of religious communities in premodern India could be juxtaposed with the way in which these have been perceived by interpreters of the past in the last couple of centuries. Incidentally such an assessment would be valuable not only to contemporary society in India but also to those societies which now host the vast Indian diaspora.[1]

So what appears as important for Thapar, a historian of early India, is not just to appreciate the essential nature of differences between her own society and outlook and that of other periods of Indian history, but rather to understand the present in light of the past, and to make the past intelligible to us in light of the present. This said, Thapar, like any other historian, social scientist, or philosopher is assuredly the child of her time, but as Lord Acton used to say, 'History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own'. In other words, as long as we can think of our past and take a critical stand in regard to our present time, there is hope for nobility of spirit. Never has this been more important in Professor Thapar's work than when she reaches to the deepest sources of 'the question of asking questions'. The central point that she makes (in response to an essay by Sundar Sarukkai in *The Public Intellectual in India* that raises the role of doubt), not only as a historian, but also as a public intellectual is the following: '[A] society like the one we live in needs its public intellectuals: people who can ask the right questions at relevant moments. Any such question has to begin with a doubt: one can't begin to question without that.' When Thapar talks about 'doubt', she does not conceive it in purely negative terms such as uncertainty, distrust, and irritation, but rather as an unavoidable step towards critical lucidity and transformative clarity. It should, therefore, be understood that for Thapar, the art of thinking history goes hand in hand with a critical attitude of mind and reasoned thinking against the logic of society and state as absolute values. As she puts it, 'One is thankful that there are some who do manage to think independently and creatively despite the system'. Here, then, in this dialectical union of history writing and dissent thinking lies the historical questioning of Thapar. That is to say, the ultimate success of a historian requires that there are no answers that close the inquiry.

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[1] Romila Thapar, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', *Modern Asian Studies*, 23 (2, 1989): 209–31.

For Thapar, therefore, the value of history is in its dynamic flow as a questioning of the past, and not as a fixed idea in time and space. However, while witnessing changes in history, the rational priority for a historian like Thapar results from the recognition of the limits of understanding historical events. The continuing importance of this point in Thapar's historical work is attested by her acknowledgement of historical research as a valuable opportunity for a creative transgression of one's intellectual and experiential horizons and the loosening of the stiffened patterns of thought. For example, she ends her lecture 'Time as a Metaphor of History' in these terms:

> This attempt at an exploration of time and history is not just an exercise in intellectual curiosity. In questioning the presuppositions about societies and cultures as they have been conceptualized in the historiography of recent times, it becomes necessary to enquire into many facets of the past. I have tried to argue that even concepts of time in early India, as read by early scholars, need to be interpreted

afresh. Our readings both of time and of history have undergone mutations. But the metaphor remains.[2]

That is to say, as the absolute diminishes as an unacceptable resolution of the problems of human existence in history, the need for a dialectical engagement with history becomes an urgent exigency in the works of Thapar. Here, the absence of commitment to fixed categories and the impulse to questioning history involves a leap out of the present conformist and complacent attitudes of mind.

Let us not forget that Thapar is not just a historian, but also a Socratic gadfly who stands by her examined life and reasoned arguments, and is ready to intervene at any moment in the Indian public sphere as well as in the global civil society. She is rightly fascinated by the Socratic dialogue as well as the matchless political debates à la Camus. They both entail a fundamental trust in the criteria of excellence that Thapar stands for. It is in this spirit of civility and the pursuit of truth that this book of conversations took shape. I have known Thapar for nearly twenty years and our intellectual friendship has been a blessing for me. Over the years, I insisted to do a book of conversations with her and she refused. But, as we discussed the project, a new dimension of confidence and serenity emerged. We agreed to a book in three voices. Therefore, Neeladri Bhattacharya, a professor of modern history at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and an ex-student of Thapar, joined us for some of the sessions. The conversations took place at Professor Thapar's home and we agreed that the chapters would centre around her life and oeuvres. So, in this manner, the book became a mixture of personal memories and reflections on history and historiography. As a result, the tone of the book is informally conversational rather than pedantically academic. A great conversationalist, Thapar's only match in relatively modern times would have been Isaiah Berlin, whom I knew well and also did a book of conversations with (in 1992). Though different in style and form of conversation, both Sir Isaiah and Thapar are fertile in ideas and have the capacity to inspire others to participate in the debate. We can add a third to these two cardinal rules: the art of listening. As a good listener, Professor Thapar is also a great conversationalist. As such she reminds me of the definition that Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein, commonly known as Madame de Staël, a French woman of letters of *Ancien Régime*, gave of conversation as 'a means of speaking just as quickly as one thinks; of spontaneously enjoying one's self ... and a sort of electricity that causes sparks to fly, and that relieves some people of the burden of their excess vivacity and awakens others from a state of painful apathy'.

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[2] Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Thapar's reputation extends worldwide—not only as a conversationalist, a mantel she inherited from many great Indians before her, but mainly as a tireless historian. That is the reason why her contributions to historical thinking, and to Indian historiography in particular, are ardently and very justly applauded around the world. Yet, there is still a great deal to learn from Thapar and there is an urgent need to rediscover her work. Last but not least, I think that Thapar's ideas about how historical knowledge is produced continue to sketch out a strategy for imagining the past. As such, it encourages us all to recognize and acknowledge the profound importance of learning as what she understands as a process of 'enabling a person to think in forms that are analytical, logical, and autonomous, not to mention creative'. This is Thapar's sincerely uttered call to us and to the next generations of historians and public intellectuals.

RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO
September 2016

Acknowledgements

I appreciate very much the opportunity of doing a book of conversation with Romila Thapar. My gratitude for her time, support, and patience. I am also grateful to my friend Neeladri Bhattacharya for his strong intellectual participation in the making of this book. I would also like to thank and express my gratitude to the editors of Oxford University Press for their hard work; this book would not have been possible without their continuing help.

Ramin Jahanbegloo
2017

When I agreed to do a book-length interview on the subject of writing history, I did not realize how problematic it is to render the spoken word into the written word: to keep a book in the conversational mode and yet retain the attention of the reader who is not conversing about the subject but is reading a text.

Three of my good friends read the transcript and offered comments. K.N. Panikkar was a colleague in the Centre for Historical Studies of the Jawaharlal Nehru University. We have had innumerable conversations on interpreting the interface between the past and the present as reflected in current academic and public debates on history. The conversation continued in his comments on this text.

Romi Khosla and I have chatted over the years not only on matters historical, but much more. His take on what might have gone into the making of some historical explanations, has made me rethink conventional explanations.

Susan Reynolds and I have been 'talking history' since we first met in 1967 when I spent time as a postdoctoral fellow at Oxford. Our recent conversations were focused on her reading of the transcript, and often hovered over definitions and the use of concepts. Our discussions helped me clarify a variety of thoughts.

Thinking about the questions raised by my friends added a further value to the very thoughtful ones that had already been put to me by Ramin Jahanbegloo and Neeladri Bhattacharya.

ROMILA THAPAR
New Delhi, 2016

I

From Panjab to London

A Happy Half-way

RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO (RJ): Thank you very much for accepting my invitation to participate in these conversations on your life and thoughts.

ROMILA THAPAR (RT): Thank you, Ramin, for inviting me to converse with you and with Neeladri. I think the intention of this conversation is to talk about the history that I write rather than just my biography. So I'll say a little bit about my growing-up years and then move on to writing history.

RJ: Let us start from the very beginning. In most of your writings you have often emphasized the connections between the past and the present. In the titles, the past is very much an important part. Could we start these conversations by applying this approach to your own life experience? You were born in 1931 in a Panjabi family. How would you describe your childhood?

RT: I suppose one of the characteristics of my childhood is that unlike many others who grow up in a single place which they regard as the location of their childhood, or their 'native place' as we say in India, I had a childhood where I was moving around from here to there to everywhere. I think that on the whole I probably enjoyed this because when I look back I seem not to have suffered too much, although at that time I occasionally thought I did, and then I complained. The times when it was irksome were changing schools and making new friends. But the compensation was the anticipation of something exciting and different in each new place.

My father was a doctor in the army, so every second or third year he would be transferred from one place to another. Initially, most of the places where we lived, and I am talking about the 1930s, were up north—the North-West Frontier Province of undivided India. He was in the medical service of the army, initially attached to regiments, and in charge of the hospitals in the British forts along the North-West Frontier. So my earliest memories are of our stay in the fort at Thal, but we also visited places such as Razmak, Kohat, Landikotal, and such like, not too far away. Later, he was posted to regular towns, first to Dalhousie in the Himalaya, and then to Peshawar and Rawalpindi. That was all approximately in the area of undivided Panjab and the north-west, or what was known in those days as the North-West Frontier Province.

The big change came when in my eleventh year he was posted from Rawalpindi to Pune, or what used to be known in those days as, Poona. We all thought, as indeed everyone in Panjab thought, that places like Bombay and Pune were part of south India. So we were very excited at the thought of going to the south where nobody had been before from the family. Of course, when we got to Pune we realized it was not the south—it was really a kind of happy half-way between the north and the south.

So, when people say, 'Where was your childhood home?' I have to say, I don't know, because it was in a sense in all these places. But basically, I think it was split between the north-west, where many years were spent up to my eleventh year, with short periods in Lahore. This was an important cantonment town in addition to being a cultural and political hub of northern India. Then there was a big chunk of eight straight years in Pune, which was an altogether different experience.

RJ: Could you talk a little bit more about your parents? Your mother, your father—what were their backgrounds?

RT: We were the usual Panjabi middle-class family. My paternal grandfather, Kunj Bihari Thapar, known to friends and family as Raisaab, from the title of Raisahib given to him by the British, had been a schoolteacher who began his career in Ludhiana in the Panjab. We prided ourselves on what we thought was a rather romantic narrative of our family, as we were amongst those Panjabi families that traced themselves back to having lived in Afghanistan. We were part of the community of Khatri traders from Panjab in India settled in Kandahar and Kabul, and trading mainly in fruit, both fresh and dried. The melons, peaches, and oranges, and the almonds, pine nuts, and raisins that flooded the markets of the Panjab were what my forefathers traded in. Then, a couple of centuries ago, the family migrated to the Panjab, to what was then a small town called Ludhiana where the Thapars clustered together and lived in a sprawling *mohalla*. Ludhiana has since become a flourishing boom town.

My grandfather began as a schoolteacher in Ludhiana and later moved to Lahore, which in those days was the great metropolis of the north and the cultural centre of the Panjab, if not of a substantial part of northern India.

He had a great flair for writing and, like many of his contemporaries, wrote and read widely in Urdu, Persian, Hindi, and Panjabi, and, of course, he knew English quite well.

I often think that over the generations we have become more incompetent in handling a variety of languages—something that elders regarded as normal. The quality of his writing was noticed by British administrators, and it was suggested to him that, instead of schoolteaching, he could be appointed to a fairly lucrative government job of reading all the vernacular newspapers, as they were called, and making a summary of their opinions for the government. He accepted this job, and excelled at it. So he moved up socially to become one of the *rayis*—I don't know how to translate the word, the gentry, I suppose—of Lahore. He ended up as a much-respected citizen and could afford to build himself a house in a pleasant garden suburb of Lahore, where we grandchildren gathered in later years. He died a few months before I was born and I have often wondered what he was like. He was a supporter of the Raj, in contrast to my father who, although a government servant, was often privately quite critical of it, and my brother who was outspoken in his criticism. I have often wondered what my grandfather would have made of those of his grandchildren who have been especially critical of colonialism.

My paternal grandmother, whom everyone called Manji, was less educated, but asserted herself as the matriarch, and very much so. The family and the household were terrified of her and for good reason. Her orders were firm and had to be obeyed, and her disapproval could be quite searing.

On my mother's side, my grandfather Kharaiti Ram Khosla, whom we all called Baoji, was a lawyer, but derived quiet pleasure from reading and reciting Persian and Urdu poetry. He practised in a city near Lahore called Ferozpur. He was of a gentle nature, not very assertive, and I often wondered why he took to law. He had a good practice, and lived comfortably. His wife, whom we called Bibiji, was strikingly beautiful, really extraordinarily lovely, with a kind of Pathan beauty that some Panjabi women have, and also assertive, but in a nicer way than my paternal grandmother. I used to tease her in later years, saying she must have had some Pathan genes. She was also the matriarch of the family and her five daughters held her in awe. My maternal grandparents, doubtless, regretted not having a son, but never for a moment was this made evident. On one occasion when the genealogy of the Khoslas was being compiled by a *panda*—the category of priests who kept genealogies—the entry under my grandfather's name read 'No children' (*bin aulad*), since there were only daughters. My grandfather's anger and indignation at this was such that the *panda* never returned to the house! My maternal grandparents were insistent that all their daughters had to be well-educated, and all five were graduates and a couple had master's degrees too. This was rather remarkable for the 1920s. I sometimes think it is strange that with patriarchy being so central to Indian society, I nevertheless grew up in a family where the two dominant personalities of grandparental generation were matriarchs. This may have been one small reason why my awareness of feminism came to me rather late!

But anyway, that was the background.

My father was one of three brothers and they all went into government service. One uncle became a member of the Indian Civil Service, but worked in a number of unusual projects such as the newly established Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Bombay, and on the construction of the new city of Chandigarh in the Panjab; while the youngest brother joined the army and ended up as the chief of army staff. My father actually wanted to be a lawyer, but his father objected strongly arguing that there were too many brief-less barristers floating around.

My suspicion, thinking back on it, is that it was not so much that he was worried about having a son whose career as a lawyer might have been uncertain in those times, but that many of these barristers were brief-less because they chose to be politicians. Quite a few such persons joined the national movement, and my grandfather would not have been happy to have his eldest son do so too. He wanted every son to be in government service. He gave my father the choice of a profession in either engineering or medicine, both of which my father disliked intensely, but it was choosing between the devil and the deep sea, and so he was shunted off to Edinburgh, where he did his degree in medicine. Many decades later when I was receiving my honorary degree from the University of Edinburgh, I was told that the ceremony was taking place in the same hall where my father would have received his graduation degree. That gave me a sense of continuity!

Religions and Storytelling

RJ: Were your parents religious?

RT: Not markedly so. The matriarchs were, but in different ways. My maternal grandmother was well-educated in Hindi and made it a point to read Hindi translations or renderings of some of the better-known Sanskrit texts. By then the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* were viewed as primary sacred texts. The *Mahabharata* perhaps less so. But this is not the same as the *Bible* and the *Quran* being treated as books exclusive and sacred to each religion, and being the texts that define the religions as religions of the book. Stories from the texts were the stock-in-trade for children and we grew up on them. To this were added folk tales, many of which had no religious colour. The sense of religion as the articulation of faith was greater in the generation of my grandparents. When my father got married he was still posted at Razmak, to what was called a 'non-family station' up in the North-West Frontier and he couldn't take his wife with him. So my mother stayed back in Lahore for a couple of years with his family. I remember my mother used to complain bitterly to me in later years that in winter, when it was bitingly cold, Manji would insist that my mother come down at four in the morning and read the *Ramayana* to her. So it was religion in that sense. There were no elaborate daily rituals, since these came into force only on special occasions. There was not much temple-going, not even for us children when we all gathered in Lahore in December each year. This may have been because the two competing sects that dominated Hindu family life in Lahore at the time were the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharma, and various members of the family vacillated between them.

Some of the cousins were also the children of my father's sisters, who lived either in Lahore or in nearby places in the Panjab. The marriages of the older cousins were invariably held in the spacious house in Lahore, and we soon knew the wedding rituals and repeated them when we were arranging the marriages of our dolls. Manji was insistent that the cousins remain in touch with each other by spending a little time together every year, which I suppose was a good thing. It provides a focus for our memories when we now meet and talk of our young days. When we gathered together for the month of December, I remember rituals being performed at home sometimes, but don't remember going to a temple.

RJ: But were you familiar with the rituals?

RT: I was familiar broadly with the rituals as children were, but not very specifically. And at a young age these were more often occasions for having fun than thinking seriously about worship. My maternal grandmother, to whom I was closer—I just found her a more empathetic person to talk to—in fact introduced me to what we now call religion. I must have been about four then, and we'd gone for the usual brief visit to my maternal grandparents. And she said to me one morning, 'I'm going to make an offering at the grave of the *pir*, whom I worship, do you want to come?'

So I said 'Oh yes', and we set off, went into the heart of the city of Ferozpur, to the *dargah* where the *pir* was buried. She did the circumambulation, said her prayer, and offered the flowers she had brought. On the way back, I asked her why she did all that. And when she heard that my mother had not as yet told me about belief in deities, acts of worship, and prayers, she scolded her when we got back, insisting that I was old enough now to know, and since I was asking questions, I needed answers. And so my mother began with the usual stories about Krishna, and explained how we were Vaishnavas and Krishna *bhakta*s, taught me some prayers and some hymns that were sung on various occasions, and filled it all out with more stories and so on, all of which I greatly enjoyed. But it was as vague as that in my early years. There was nothing specifically deep about it. When I had asked what a *pir* was, my grandmother told me that he was also a devotee of a supernatural being called by various names—*Rab*, *Ishvara*, Allah, Bhagavan—and was concerned about our well-being, and that he was worshipped in the same manner as were many others who were regarded as holy beings. In the kind of upbringing I had, there was no formal training in what I was expected to know and understand, or what I was to believe, or of graduated forms of worship, to prepare me for a clear religious identity. Some of the taboos of daily life were told to us and we were expected to order our lives accordingly.

At that time it did not strike me, but later I realized that this was an introduction to religion as the belief in a benign deity and the supplication of the deity, with the aid if need be of a number of holy men and women. I was struck by the fact that my grandmother, who was a devotee of Vishnu, and was quite literate in Hindi—the language in which she read the *Gita*, and in which she and my mother corresponded regularly — would go regularly to offer flowers at the grave of the *pir* whom she greatly venerated. Whatever slight confusion this may have caused in my mind was sorted out by my being told that the worship was of a supreme deity, and that seemed to be all that mattered. Who the specific deity was, even among Hindu deities, was not always the central concern or crucial to the worship. The *pir* was seen as a holy person.

RJ: So you didn't distinguish between Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism....

RT: Not markedly so, no, not till somewhat later, when I became conscious of these differences. In the Panjab in any case people referred largely only to Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism. Buddhism had faded away earlier. But as a child, it seemed to me to be all part of the same system. It was worship, it was offering flowers, it was singing *bhajans* (hymns), and it was telling stories. I still remember singing '*Om jai jagadish hare*' with great gusto whenever an opportunity arose, and in an odd kind of way feeling pleased with myself when I did so. And there were so many stories to tell. Some were stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and some were myths about other gods or heroic persons. Some were stories about princes and princesses, or about animals that behaved like humans and these were not connected directly with religion. Among these stories, my absolute favourite was one called '*Gul-bakavali*'. I still remember my utter excitement when I was old enough to actually read the story instead of just listening to it being narrated.

RJ: So you went to school with people of different religious backgrounds?

RT: Yes, from all religious backgrounds. My schooling was largely either in primary schools for young children or in convents as I grew older. It was a done thing in those days that the daughters of government officers after primary school tended to go to convents as the schooling there was fairly uniform throughout the country. The syllabus was geared to what was called the Senior Cambridge Exam, which was the exam at the end of high school. So, even if one's father was transferred from the north to the south, one was not completely thrown by having to deal with entirely new textbooks, courses, and so on. There was some familiarity in what was being taught from one school to the next. And the cantonments where government servants lived and worked had enough schools for any number of children.

In some ways there was for me a bit of a tussle in understanding the function of religion. What I learnt and practised of religion, rather impressionistically at home, was somewhat different from the formal religious teaching that other children received in school if they were Christian. Convents were Christian schools, and although they would often declare that scripture classes are not compulsory for non-Christians, and they don't have to attend, nevertheless, if one was curious, one was allowed to just sit in and listen to what was being said. I was by then curious, and I used to sit quietly to one side, attracted mainly, of course, by the many stories, so unlike the ones I heard at home. Jesus and his disciples and the stories from the Old Testament were not like the stories I had grown up with! The Old Testament stories of the Jewish prophets were what I found captivating in their strangeness. The New Testament and the stories about Christ were more prosaic in comparison. So scripture classes for me became a kind of storytelling session. Looking back, I am now surprised that at no point in the convent, where I had a major part of my schooling, was there an attempt on the part of the nuns to persuade me to become a Christian. Attending classes in Christian scriptures was not required and was entirely optional. Since I was not being tested and graded in the subject, it was just fun as a storytelling session.

A Secular Environment

RJ: But at home you grew up in a secular environment.

RT: I never thought about the difference between the religious and the secular. I saw school as part of a cantonment culture touched by the norms of British colonial ways of life, and largely distinct from this were the norms of my life at home where the people who came and went were rarely identified by what we today would call 'religious labels'. If such identifications did exist, they tended to be tucked away in the back of our minds and in any case passed us by without much comment. Only very occasionally would there be an incident where the identity of a religious label would get forefronted.

In Peshawar, for example, where we went after the stint in the North-West Frontier Province, my parents' closest friends were Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan or Badshah Khan, as he was also called, and his brother Dr Khan Sahib, as well as Sikandar (the popular form of Iskander) Mirza and his family. Now when I think back on those times I am amazed at these friendships. A doctor that the former, the Frontier Gandhi, as he was called, trusted was my father, and actually, this was so with many other people as well. This was strange because my father disliked medicine, but for some strange reason people always came to him and he ended up being a doctor to all kinds of interesting people.

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was very fond of my parents, and their friendship was so informal that he would just drop in at any time and would shout from the entrance, 'Open the door! I've come for a cup of tea!' and we would rush to welcome him and he would settle down comfortably to drink tea with us.

RJ: What are your memories of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan? Was he an impressive man? I mean, as a child, you should have seen him as being very tall.

RT: Oh yes, yes, very tall—in every way.

RJ: But what are your recollections of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan?

RT: I was a child of seven or eight, and I remember him and associate him with affection and warmth and friendliness. Very likable! I can still remember him, I can hear that voice. He always teased us and referred to us as 'Pathans' because our forefathers once lived in Kandahar.

I have the fondest, fondest memories of him. I was too young to know who he was, except that he was somebody I was really attached to, as also were my parents who were, of course, familiar with his political work. I sometimes think it was quite daring of my father to have been so close to someone who was strongly opposed to the British.

RJ: You were also talking about a second person. Who was that person?

RT: The second person, interestingly, lived next door to us with his large family, and all of us children lived in each other's houses. We were such close family friends that we went on vacations together. He was Sikandar Mirza who was at that time the British political agent, and again a good friend of my father's. The two of them would spend much time together just teasing each other. My mother and Sikander Mirza's wife, Riffat, were also very close. My dearest friend was their daughter Zeenat who was a year older than me. Wherever Zeenat went, I would be there. Now that I think of it, in terms of the political differences they all had, I can't quite comprehend how these close friendships worked out. Yet my father retained a deep friendship with both. His friendship with Sikandar Mirza took a sad turn when Sikandar later visited us in Delhi and over dinner spoke excitedly about the possibility of Partition. My father defended a united India, but Sikandar would have none of it. At that point, the friendship began to get untied. There may well have been other conversations and arguments about the proposed changes, but I was too young to recall them. We seemed to be unaware of, or too far away from, the seeping change that was entering the lives of those with political ambitions in which religion as an instrument of political mobilization was playing a role. Clearly, by then Sikander Mirza had decided that with the British Raj coming to an end he was going to opt for a political career, which, to start with, he did successfully, but in the end, not so successfully.

In the early 1940s, when the two families were vacationing together in Murree, Sikandar Mirza had a *mullah* who came every morning to teach the children how to recite the *Quran*. There were occasional comments about Islam, but nothing of great consequence. At the same time, I was exposed to Christianity while at school. Despite this, my parents knew that there was no question of my being attracted to either of these religions. I was a Hindu along the lines that they were. When I was older I did discuss with them whether they were anxious about putting me into a convent that might have led to my being converted to Christianity. Their reply was a reassertion of their confidence that no such thing would happen. They were quite ready to discuss Islam or Christianity with me and would go on to explain how neither of them could supersede the religion I was born into. This was done not in a boringly preachy fashion, but in an attractively casual way. This may explain why I have always treated the practice of religion in a generally casual way, unless what pretends to be religion comes at me like a battering ram. In my early teens, I did go through an intense phase of attachment to the deity our family worshipped, Krishna, but by my late teens this had worn off. My take on religion was more measured until my twenties when I veered between being an agnostic and an atheist, and ultimately settled for the latter. Nevertheless, I have never been averse to the more sensitive aspects of the human condition present to some degree in all religions, such as in music as a form of worship.

But I will say that there have been moments in my later life when I have experienced what might be called not a religious experience, but an experience that deeply moved me. This led not to belief, but to unusual introspection. It was the kind of moment that I remember for its aesthetic and emotional quality and for making me aware of a different perception of the world from the one I treated as normal. One such occasion was a visit to Tirupati, on a UGC visiting committee to the university. I was taken to the early morning ritual of *suprabhatam* in the temple: standing quietly and allowing the recitations to flow over me as the deity was dressed, flower by flower, was something that touched me deeply.

Similarly, my first visit to Avebury in England, with its pattern of stone megaliths where I walked alone in the silence of twilight, gave me a sense of a special experience, special also because it was a place associated with what we think of as belief prior to any formal religion. On such occasions, I recall thinking that if religious expression could have remained direct and simple, the world could have been spared much violence and bloodshed in the name of religion. Had the Tirupati temple not been there, and had it been just the ritual, that, perhaps, for me might have been a religious experience. But the temple, mosque, church, *gurdwara*, and such places of worship, become symbols of wealth and social control—and of organization and enterprise—and change the meaning of religion.

The technicalities of religion didn't matter. One watched or performed certain rituals at marriages and festivals. It was partly religious and partly fun. Some just had a passing association with religion for us as children, such as Holi which was entirely fun or Basant before it, when one always had a new set of yellow clothes and the kite-flying season was inaugurated. And that could even prompt quarrels among the children. These were spoken of as 'festivals' and for us the religious side of such festivals was less important although we were aware of it. It was just too much fun at Holi to be throwing coloured water on one's older siblings and friends and even on one's parents. The one day of the year when one could try and let go! And Diwali, up to a point, was the same thing; it was the fun of getting crackers, *diyas* (lamps), candles, sweets, *meva* (dry fruit), and so on. And then in the evening there would be a little ritual, and one would join in for the singing of *bhajans* and the formal prayers.

The daily prayers that I was taught by my mother were very personalized prayers. I remember to this day all the little promises that I would hold out when praying to the deity and pleading for help to get good grades in exams. Many of the prayers focused on the imminent and immediate problems of one's life.

RJ: So you have always been in contact with this ritualistic side of religion, more than the fundamentalist side.

RT: Yes. I suppose so.

Talking Politics

RJ: We are talking about the late 1930s and the early 1940s. This is the greatest time of the Indian independence movement. Was your family influenced directly by these events? Were your parents active in the Indian independence movement?

RT: No, because my father was a government servant, he couldn't be active. Years later when he retired, he wrote a history of the Armed Forces Medical Service called *The Morale Builders*. Apart from the history, he discusses what they used to refer to as the 'Indianization' of the services, the gradual coming in of more and more Indian officers and the weeding out of British officers. As a senior officer, this was a process in which he was actively involved especially in the 1940s. But otherwise, no, he was....

RJ: But he didn't approve of the British Raj, of course.

RT: No, he certainly didn't, he was very different from my grandfather in these matters, and, of course, the times were different too. But since he was in a government job, in a government run by the British, he felt he couldn't very well abuse them openly, whatever he may have felt about them privately.

RJ: When Badshah Khan used to come to your house, did they discuss politics?

RT: I guess they must have. I frankly don't remember because I was too young then. Now, of course, when I think back, it was in some ways extraordinary that we had Badshah Khan and Sikander Mirza visiting us quite informally. At that stage it didn't strike me that Sikander was a political agent of the British, and particularly selected to work in the areas with the Pathans, and that there was much going on at that time politically. My father never really talked about that side of his friendships, although this may be because I did not understand the conversations. He had an immense respect for Bacha Khan, which he didn't need to express publicly. Privately, there was no question that he thought very very highly of him.

RJ: How about the other members of the family? Your mother, your grandmother—were they engaged in Indian politics? Were they passionate about the Independence movement?

RT: No, not really. I had one aunt, my father's sister, who was the principal of a girl's college in Lahore. She was faintly interested in politics, but not very much since she preferred to discuss local gossip!

It was a different situation from what it has become more recently. Politics was not discussed openly and all the time, instead it was a part of the unspoken ambience. Whatever one did, one was aware of the political context. The North-West Frontier from Dera Ismail Khan to the Swat valley was viewed by the British as a line of defence. They maintained it as a frontier area, with a local turbulence being, I suspect, deliberately sustained by the British so that it remained a militarized zone. Forays into the countryside ended up in attacks on villages thought to be militant hideouts, which led to retaliation. The Pathan tribes also had their own social and ethical codes—the Pashtunwali—not clearly understood by the British, and there would be trouble with the insistence among the Pathans on revenge-killing as a right. The British had experienced Irish revolutionaries, and the Pathans were probably viewed as similar to the Sinn Fenians, which, of course, they were not. The shoot-outs meant that people like my father were being constantly called upon to attend to the wounded.

My father had no illusions about the great game the British were playing with the local people of the north-west and the British fear of Russia, which is why I think the silent film he made was not just a fun movie, but reflected the politics of the time. He was a rather extraordinary person in some ways, in the sense he was always picking up some new activity that kept him occupied in his spare time, and his interests ranged far and wide. He was also remarkably sensitive to the changes that were taking place around him. I was amazed when years later I heard him say that his grandson should not join government service, but be a freelance researcher, as that would give him greater freedom of thought and action. I was most impressed when subsequently I discovered he had meticulously worked his way through Basham's book on ancient India, as he did not want to be ignorant of the subject that I had researched.

My mother was quieter and less given to other activities, but this did not stop her from taking an active interest in what my father was engaged in. Many years later, when she came to live with me after my father had passed away, she liked to participate in those of my activities that she felt she was able to. And this was not just out of inquisitiveness: she was curious about what attracted me to such activities. So even before that, when I was working for my degree in London, she began to teach herself Sanskrit and slowly and quietly covered the elementary stage. When I asked her why she had done this, she explained that I had mentioned to her once that Sanskrit was important to the study of ancient history and so she was curious to know what this language was like. It was this sense of curiosity that came to the forefront in her later years, and our relationship, from being that of a mother and a daughter, also became one of a very close friendship.

Following Gandhi

RJ: But you yourself got interested in politics, because I read somewhere that when you were at St. Mary's High School in Pune, you used to go to the prayer meetings of Mahatma Gandhi.

RT: That's right, yes. But that was, of course, something that happened when I had moved to Pune. You know, one of the things—and let me just go back a little bit—one of the things about not growing up in a single place is, of course, that the larger community in which one lives also changes. When you move from one place to the next, you leave your friends and the wider community. So the only community I had had, which was a kind of stable community that I could understand more fully, was the community of people who were contemporaries of my father, and who were in government service and had lived in cantonments as had my father, and, of course, I got to know their children. Those of us whose fathers were in the armed services were known as 'Army brats'. So the cantonment culture, which in those days was distinct from the urban–civilian culture, was the dominant culture in my life.

This had been imprinted on me in Peshawar and Rawalpindi. But in Pune it became a little different as Pune was closer to the more central political events than the North-West Frontier, and the city as distinct from the cantonment had a vibrant life of its own. When we moved to Pune, and I joined school—St. Mary's High School—in 1942, the Quit India Movement had started. Gandhiji was in and out of being under arrest in Yeravada (Pune). When not under arrest, he often stayed in a nature-cure clinic run by a Dr Mehta. And he used to hold his prayer meetings there, and it was not too far away from where we lived. Pune was more centrally involved in the politics of nationalism at the time. There was talk of Indian participation in World War II as being somehow linked to the coming of independence. Now that I think about it, in the 1930s the British were very much of a presence, but in the 1940s their presence seemed to have been somehow less immediate.

I remember once when going by train, as we always did from Lahore to Ferozpor, at one station along the way there was a group of National Congress people who'd been handcuffed and were being taken to prison by the police. They were shouting, '*Inquilab Zindabad*' (Long live the revolution). I turned to my mother, I must have been five years old, and asked, 'Who are these people?' She replied, 'These are people who are fighting for our freedom'. I said, 'Why aren't we free?' To this she replied, 'Because we're slaves, we're slaves of the British'. I still remember she used the term *ghulam* (slaves): it was a strong term. And I asked, 'Why are we slaves?' Then she tried to explain the reason as simply as possible.

I think that atmosphere changed very much in the 1940s because, by 1942, the British knew that their days were numbered, that they were going to have to leave. And, therefore, people became much more open about the fact that they resented the presence of the British, that they were anti-colonial. My father, despite being a government officer, was noticeably more outspoken now than before.

When Gandhiji was in jail in Yeravada, the official doctors who attended to him, other than his own doctor-friends, were from the government medical service (of the civil side and not the army) and were friends of my father. So when Gandhiji was fasting, they would drop in almost every evening, and there would be a discussion of 'What is the bulletin; how well is he; what's happening; what should be done'; and so on. Although my father was not formally involved with the medical treatment, there was a daily discussion. And there was much more of an atmosphere of 'We're going to be free soon, so we can do and say much more than we did before'. And it came to be seen as customary that when Gandhiji had his prayer meetings, we'd finish school, do our prep quickly, rush home, and then go to attend the prayer meetings. Fortunately, in those days, we were staying close to Dr Mehta's clinic. And off I'd go with two or three of my buddies.

RJ: And your parents knew that you were following Gandhiji?

RT: Yes, yes. At one point my father did say to me, rather abruptly, 'You really mustn't go on doing this kind of thing so often as you're putting my job in danger, because if they find out that you're attending these meetings regularly, they can't do anything to you, but they'll take it out on me'. And I looked at him and thought to myself, 'You're old and big enough to look after yourself; they won't do anything to you'.

And then I had an indelible experience. You know in those days in school, as teenagers we all had a little autograph album, as we called it, and we would ask our friends to write something and sign in it. So someone said, 'Why don't you get Gandhiji's signature?'

So the next prayer meeting I went to I carried this little book with me, and after the meeting was over I went up to the dais where he was sitting. With great fear and trembling, I said to the organizer, 'I would like his autograph'. They had a rule that anyone who wanted his autograph had to pay five rupees to the Congress fund. So I put in my five rupees saved from my pocket money, went up to Gandhiji, and made my request. He signed his name on my autograph album, and when handing it back to me he looked at the clothes I was wearing and said, 'You're wearing silk'. I said 'Yes' to which he said, 'You must never wear silk, you must only wear *khadi*. Go home and tell your parents that you want to wear only *khadi*.' I said 'Yes, Gandhiji' and rushed home. And on reaching home I said to my parents, 'I'm only going to wear *khadi*!' We had an argument over this, my parents and I. Finally, my father said, 'Get her a couple of *salwar-kurta*s in *khadi*. In two months' time she'll forget about it.' And that I am afraid is exactly what happened.

RJ: Do you still have the autograph?

RT: I still have it somewhere, yes.

So there was that. The other influence on me at the time was that of my brother. I had two siblings: my brother Romesh was ten years older than me, and my sister Bimla was nine years older than me. They were in school when I was a young child. So I really grew up as kind of 'only child' until I was about 16 or 17 and then the gap between us narrowed and I began to feel I had siblings.

My sister Bimla was married to Harcharanlal Bhatia, or Channi as we all called him. He was a doctor, at first in the army and later moved to the navy. He was initially posted to distant places, so I only got to know Bimla when she came to stay with us when Channi served in the front in Africa and Italy during World War II.

My brother was in Bombay. He'd got his first job as a journalist working in the *Times of India*, to the absolute horror of my uncle in the civil service who said, 'How can he reject a government job and take on something like journalism?' They had such contempt for journalism, although our grandfather had been doing more or less that. But anyway, that was government service and this was independent journalism.

My brother was married in 1944 to Raj Malhotra and continued to live and work in Bombay. I used to spend my short vacations with them. They were very much into the politics of the time, especially into the early cultural ventures, and there much that was happening in Bombay—a truly vibrant city in those days. Coming as I did from a cantonment culture, Bombay, for me, was the opening up of the universe. They were doing the kinds of things that I had only read and heard about. None of the people in the cantonment culture would have endorsed the free thinking of the young liberals and leftist nationalists of Bombay in those days. So, for me, this was the discovery of a new world. This, too, influenced my thinking beyond the cantonment culture. My brother used to send me simple books on contemporary matters, attractively written so as to develop my interest in the wider world.

RJ: So people like Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel were your heroes at the time?

RT: Yes, Gandhi and Nehru particularly.

RJ: Did you get to see Nehru too?

RT: I did not at that time, but I got to see him when I came to Delhi. I was with a student group that asked to see him, and he gave us an appointment. He was amazingly kind and patient, sitting with us for about an hour and chatting with each of us in turn, asking, 'What are you doing, what are you going to do with yourself?' and so on. And then, of course, ten years later when I published my very first book, which was on Ashoka, someone mentioned to Nehru that there was a new book by a young historian, with a somewhat different interpretation of the king. And Ashoka, of course, was one of Nehru's heroes, so he said he would like to read the book. I sent him the book, and he wrote me back a little later, thanking me and saying he was looking forward to having some time when he could read it.

RJ: That's very nice.

RT: I thought it was fantastic—a courtesy that would be absent among the prime ministers of these days.

RJ: You were 17 when Gandhiji was assassinated. Do you have a very clear recollection of that day?

RT: Mine is not a recollection from Delhi because we were in Pune. I remember it began as a perfectly normal day. Then the news came through on the radio, and everybody was just stunned. We were ringing each other up and saying, 'Have you heard the news? Is it true? Is it possible?' And the great fear was about who had done it. Which religion did he belong to? So when the news came that the assassin was Nathuram Godse, and that he was a staunch Hindu....

RJ: A student of Savarkar....

RT: Yes. That connection was made a little later. The initial reaction was that, as he's a Hindu, so at least there won't be communal riots. That was the fear initially, when the news of the assassination....

RJ: At that age did you have a fair understanding of Hindu fundamentalism?

RT: Well, no, not very much other than the obvious. We had been through Partition. I didn't experience it because I was a boarder in school, my father being then posted to Delhi. Two things alerted me to something unpleasant having happened. These were, that from the first of August, the nuns didn't allow us to see the newspapers because, as they told us later, they thought, 'Goodness knows how upsetting it will be....'

It was a mixed crowd at the school. There were a few children of the remaining British officers, there were some Anglo-Indians, there were girls from the Bene Israeli community that had a noticeable presence in Pune, and there were many more Indian children—so there was some uncertainty about reactions. The only news I could get was from those of my Indian friends who were day scholars. So I would ask them what was happening and they would tell me what the newspapers were reporting. My mother's letters from Delhi were also giving me news. She mentioned that Manji and my aunts had come from Lahore to Delhi just for a short while. They were waiting for things to settle down before going back. It was assumed that it was a matter of two or three weeks and everybody would go back. But, of course, that didn't happen. So I wasn't very clear about it until we had a midterm break in late September. And then I came to Bombay to stay for a week with my sister-in-law's parents, my brother and his wife being in London at the time. And that's when I first got to know about what really happened. I found the news deeply disturbing, because I couldn't understand what had brought this on. We had been soaked in the ideology of Indian nationalism that spoke about the unity of Indians, so why was there this mutual slaughter? The extreme religious nationalism or communalism, as it was called at the time, of the Muslim League was, of course, much discussed, but its counterpart in Hindu communal nationalism less so.

The other side of these events was something that turned out to be almost the one event in my life that made me begin to think seriously about the meaning of independence. This was connected to the fifteenth of August 1947. A month prior to this, the Mother Superior of the school had said to me, 'You're the Indian prefect in the school, so you will have to raise the flag, plant a sapling, and make a short speech on the fifteenth of August'. And I was terrified during my waking hours of having to do this; I had many sleepless nights thinking, 'What am I going to say? What am I going to say—because all the parents will be there, the whole school will be gathered, and there will be special invitees, and so on.'

My history teacher said to me, just think of a couple of questions that are bothering you about the present and try and speak about them in your brief speech. I remember the two questions that were in the air, as it were, and that I was most concerned about. One was, now that we are free, what kind of society are we going to make for ourselves? This was not an original thought of mine as everybody in those days was commenting on this question. We didn't want the society that the British built for us, because even among the young ones there was a feeling that colonial society was restrictive. But then what was it to be replaced by? What did we mean when we talked about our own kind of society? I certainly did not know, but nevertheless somehow felt the questions were worth asking. And the other major question was, who are we as Indians? There was much talk about the Indian identity at the time, and later it was to become a contested question. The question of collective identity is, of course, central to all nationalisms. These were the two questions that I mentioned briefly.

But I often think that these are the two questions that have really stayed with me all my life, in my public life and in my working life: what kind of society are we going to build for ourselves, and who are we? What is our identity? I am not trying to suggest that these were carefully thought-out and imprinted on my mind, to be referred to all the time, but rather they were among the kind of questions that hovered vaguely when I thought beyond myself.

Living with the British

RJ: Absolutely. So that's a good point actually. This idea of 'Indianness'—at what age did you really start thinking about this 'Indianness'?

RT: I suppose from the moment I became conscious of being hostile towards the British. The question 'Why are you hostile?' was met with the immediate reaction that it was because we are Indian. The question that we did not ask is: 'Why are we Indian and what does it mean to be Indian?' We just assumed that if one looked like an Indian, behaved like an Indian, and had an Indian name, one was Indian. But the binding factor was that we're anti-British.

RJ: What age was that? I mean, was it during your time at the elementary school?

RT: Pretty well, this would be … the earliest close encounter I had with the British was when my father was posted to the Thal fort in the North-West Frontier Province where he was the only Indian officer—the others were all British. It was a well-guarded fort, so officers could bring their families. There were some children and a sort of rudimentary school that we all attended. And when my mother and I arrived, my mother was upset, and she kept saying, 'Poor child, she's not going to have anyone to talk to because they're all English-speaking, and she only speaks Hindi and Panjabi'. I didn't know a word of English then. And my father kept saying to her, 'You wait and see. A month down the line, they'll be talking Hindi and she'll be talking English.' And that is exactly what happened. I was thrown in their midst and I was miserable for the first couple of weeks, and then we were all running around together and communicating beautifully.

RJ: And you started learning English then….

RT: And I started learning English at that point, yes. Back then I felt no hostility. Because it was all fun and games, we were kids together—birthday parties, Christmas parties, and that sort of thing….

And my father made a fictional silent movie that unfortunately cannot now be found. No one knows where the reels have got to, which is very sad. It was quite an extraordinary movie. It was about a white Russian count who escapes from the Soviet Union and comes to the Pathan area and starts an agitation among the Pathans against the British. The British governor and his daughter come on a visit, and the Pathans kidnap them by blocking the rail-track with stones. The regiment then goes to rescue them, which it does, and the young officer of the regiment who leads the rescue team and the governor's daughter fall in love. And it ends with them getting married in the fort. The Pathan chief meanwhile has been put under trial along with the Russian count.

The background lent itself to such a story. Pathan country, as it was loosely called, was inhabited by a large number of Pathan clans. They were partially nomadic and partially settled in a landscape of low hills, much of it brown, barren, and rugged, but with patches of green where there were water sources. They were agro-pastoralists living in mud fortresses built on hilltops, herding large numbers of sheep and goats, and cultivating small patches of fertile land around sources of water. They observed their own customary laws and had their own clan polities where power was exercised by clan chiefs, dependent, however, on the heads of families. British law was hardly effective in this area, nor was there much evidence of an administrative control. It was a frontier zone *par excellence* at the crossing point of central, west, and south Asia, and was kept as a frontier zone and scantily controlled. This was largely a kind of barrier against the feared Russian intrusion into north-west India. It was thought that if the Pathans could be kept as somewhat unruly, they could be mobilized, if need be, as the first defence against the Russians. This was not the first time that this region had been seen in these terms. The movie somehow captured that ambience.

RJ: That's fantastic—who played in that movie?

RT: All the officers. They seem to have had the time of their lives. There were scenes of them on the march through the rough Khyber country and then the attack on the mud fort of the Pathans.

RJ: Did you have a role?

RT: My mother had a role as a nurse. But no, I didn't have a role. I was just a kid. We used to watch this film for years afterwards. It was Sunday-evening entertainment. 'What should we do? Let's look at *Kidnapped*.' He'd called it *Kidnapped*. And we'd sit there, our eyes glued to the screen, even though we knew the sequence of every scene.... And even when talkies came, we would love watching it.

RJ: So how did the British ... what was their attitude towards your family? Were you ... did they consider you as equals?

RT: Not at all. If you were reasonably polite and friendly, you were accepted, you were invited to their parties, and you invited them back, and so on. But it was a distanced relationship. Close friendships were rare. My mother, for instance, when guests were invited for dinner, made a point of saying that 'Dinner tonight is going to be different because it's all us and our friends', or, 'It's a mix of us and them'. That 'us' and 'them' was very clear. And if it was 'them', then there was much more formality and those serving had to be told how to serve the drinks and food. And if it was just us, then it was much nicer and more relaxed.

RJ: Did this 'us' and 'them' exist also for the children?

RT: It began to exist when I was in school. Let's see ... not in the first two schools I went to. But yes, when I was in St. Mary's in Pune, I was very aware of 'us' and 'them'. Although the nuns tried not to make a distinction, it did come through, though not very obviously. I mean ... it was all over the place, so you couldn't really avoid it. And it was there in little things. One would automatically cheer the Indian girl who was playing very well in football, because she was 'us'. And if you did not know the other, you referred to her as 'that British girl'. Little things like that, nothing too....

RJ: Did you have any classmates who were deeply anti-British?

RT: No, because if they had been that deeply anti-British they wouldn't have come to a convent school. But they were sufficiently concerned. I mean, it was after all my Indian classmates who were the ones who would come with me to Gandhiji's prayer meetings.

Reading Novels

RJ: Since we're talking about your educational background, I'm very much interested to know about your reading at the time. Were you interested in novels? Did you also read any history books?

RT: Do you mean in school?

RJ: I mean in and out of school.

RT: In school one read the prescribed books, and most were readable and interesting. I think those who wrote school textbooks in those days had a better idea of how to write for young readers both in terms of comprehension and readability than they have now. Having written two textbooks for middle schools in India, I know how difficult it is to convey information, discuss it, and at the same time make the end product attractive. Each subject we were taught required the reading of three or four books apart from those prescribed, and it wasn't just one textbook that saw you through.

Novels, yes, because novels were fun to read. And you could read them at any time. One went through the usual run of Dickens, the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen.... And then there were pop novels that circulated among us teenage girls beginning to develop romantic ideas—the novels that I now think of as rather ghastly, such as those of Marie Corelli, Louisa May Alcott, and Baroness Orczy, but we lapped it all up.

RJ: So mostly British writers?

RT: Yes, British writers mainly. I did at one stage ask, 'Why aren't we reading Indian writers?' And then I was put on to Premchand, which was the standard recommendation.

RJ: Did you read Kipling?

RT: I read a bit of Kipling, yes. I read *Kim* and quite enjoyed it; I liked the mystification of who the *lama* was, but didn't think about it very much, just thought it was rather fun to have somebody like that around.

I loved *Jane Eyre*. I mean that was really the teenager's great romantic fantasy.

Dickens, up to a point. Not very much.

Premchand impressed me enormously, although at that stage I read the occasional translation. My reading of books in Hindi came later when my familiarity with the written language increased. Urdu was the first language I learnt to write among Indian languages. As a child, my mother taught me the alphabet, and this was largely because I wanted to write letters to my maternal grandmother. My English wasn't good enough and she anyway didn't know English, so I could only write letters in Panjabi, but in the Urdu script. Strangely enough, nobody thought of teaching me Hindi until I was about 11 or 12.

Discovering the Indian Classics

RJ: So you learnt to write Hindi or you could just speak it?

RT: No, I learnt to read and write it. But I preferred the beautiful Urdu script, the *nastaliq*. And I think that was very much a Panjabi thing. Many Panjabi Khatri families, or at least the men belonging to my parents' and grandparents' generations, were largely Urdu-writing and speaking. And some wrote Panjabi in the Urdu script. The more extensive use of Hindi, as far as I remember, was among the women. The current Gurmukhi script became widespread later.

RJ: How about Persian?

RT: Both my grandfathers knew Persian. My maternal grandfather knew it well. In fact, my initial interest in reading Urdu poetry, which began when I was much older, was largely when I used to spend holidays with them, and he would sit down with the book of poems and explain the words to me. He kind of tutored me. But that was....

RJ: So at home you studied Indian literature. Did you read the Indian classics?

RT: A little bit, yes. But in translation, as I did not know Sanskrit in my school days. My Sanskrit reading began with the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha*, as these were the Sanskrit texts that Shashtriji, who first taught me Sanskrit a few years later, prescribed for my initial reading.

RJ: The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*?

RT: Not very much, no. I mean one read excerpts, not the entire text. When studying Sanskrit one did have to read excerpts from the epics and the *Manu Dharmashastra*, and such like.

RJ: Do you have any memories of your teachers? At the different schools you went to, any one in particular?

RT: I don't remember the teachers in the very first school I went to, which was a kindergarten in Dalhousie ... absolutely no memory. But I went to a very pleasant school in Peshawar, a private school run by a woman called Miss Birch. I liked her, and although she was strict, she was always accessible and ready to explain what one wanted to know.

I had a very good teacher in English and history at the Station School in Rawalpindi, Miss Parkinson. The school was only up to class four. The other teacher was a Miss Khan who taught us not just the Urdu language from the prescribed book, but also chatted with us about Urdu poetry.

The Pune school teachers I remember very well, because I was a little older then, and much more aware of being at school. We had some English teachers and we had some Anglo-Indian and Indian teachers. The person who taught us Urdu was a Bengali, Mrs Ganguly, and she was excellent. The botany teacher was a very flamboyant Anglo-Indian who used to dress in bright purple and orange and was liberal in her use of perfume. She was a great hit with all the girls, because she was obviously a 'glamour girl'. I loved botany because I loved drawing flowers and foliage. I was, in fact, torn between taking up botany or literature and history when I left school.

And then we had an excellent English and history teacher called Miss Fleming, whom we all called 'Floff' because of her fluffy, white hair. She was particular about information being correct and about analysing it, and she was very witty. But in the intermediate school our history teacher was Miss French who wore lovely, long, old-fashioned frocks and looked as if she had come out of a turn-of-century picture book. I still remember her stunning class on the Harappan civilization and her explanation of what it meant to live in an urbanized settlement.

A Nehruvian Ideal

RJ: How did you get interested in history?

RT: It was quite a late development—in the sense that I liked it as a subject at school—but then I liked literature, and I liked botany. I was really very torn between which of them was my absolute favourite. I guess I liked literature and history because we had an excellent teacher, and I was influenced by that.

And then, the two questions that I referred to earlier that continued to interest me, but lay dormant till later: one was the repeated question 'Who are we?' which was very much in the air, in the sense that people were talking about that; and what determines identity, how far back do we go as a people, how far back were we a nation? These were questions that, if not explicitly asked, were implicit.

The other event that I now realize swung me in the direction of ancient history was tied to the question of identity, but it also went beyond that. It was not simply a question of finding out who we were by going back to the beginning, to the ancient period of history, rather than starting with modern history, but there was a bigger search at stake. After I left school, I had six months between the Senior Cambridge Exam in December and the opening of university in June. And how I looked forward to an extended vacation. I thought I would have a marvellous six months of doing all the things I could never find enough time for in school. I would go riding and swimming, and read all the novels that I could possibly get my hands on—what my mother disdainfully called 'Your story books'. It was to be a sort of idyllic period. My father was then the director of the medical services in the Southern Command, and the Southern Command then included the Bombay Presidency and the earlier Madras Presidency. So he went on tour to Madras on one occasion and had an afternoon free. He enquired from a friend about what he should do in the afternoon since the train was to leave at night. The friend suggested a visit to the museum, but my father was not greatly amused at the idea, museums generally being dull places in those days. However, his friend assured him that there were some good things to see there. Since he had nothing better to do, my father went to the museum. He walked directly into the gallery that had the south Indian bronzes. And as he told us later, he stood there absolutely transfixed by the beauty of the Chola figures and wondered why no one had ever told him about them. It was his moment of epiphany. My father saw these bronze icons of deities and occasionally a ruler or a religious teacher and found them remarkable and aesthetically exciting. He came back and collected a number of books on the subject and started reading them systematically. After a couple of weeks, one evening he announced at dinner that it wasn't good enough just him reading the books, because he needed someone to discuss the contents of what he was reading. My mother, knowing what was coming, said immediately, 'Not me! I'm very busy. I can't do anything.' We were awaiting the arrival of my sister, who was expecting her second baby. Her husband was then posted to a one-horse town in the north, so she wanted to have the delivery in my parents' home. My mother knew how tied up she would be with the event. So my father turned to me and said, 'You're on vacation'. I had no choice. I had to read those books. But I think however much I might have resented this inroad into my vacation in the beginning, the reading did slowly grip me, and I think later on when I decided I wanted to do ancient history, one of the reasons was that I had this tiny familiarity with one aspect of it. My father's enthusiasm was such that some years later he was persuaded to write a short introductory book, *Icons in Bronze*.

RJ: What did you study at Panjab University in Shimla from where you finally graduated?

RT: I did an honours course in literature, because that was the only honours programme that they had. I had to take a mix of subjects and I did history, political science, French, and honours in English. Which is why when I got the degree—and I had to have a BA in order to get admission into London University—when I got to London and wanted to study history, they said that since my honours degree was not in history, so even though I was already a graduate, I would have to take the London honours degree in history as a first step. It seemed as if I was endlessly spending my life doing BAs.

RJ: Did you start university with a Nehruvian ideal of building a new nation and a new India?

RT: Very much so, yes. I mean—leaving school—we were all concerned with how were we going to contribute towards constructing a new society. That was a major concern.

A Radical-minded Student

RJ: So what took you to England?

RT: Well, I suppose it was.... It was actually a strange sort of decision. I had wanted to go to Oxford, and I sat for the entrance exam, and they said I was substandard so they could not give me admission. Years later, I was given an honorary DLit degree from Oxford University, and it gave me immense pleasure to start my acceptance speech by saying that at last I had been exonerated, because I had been declared substandard as a student, but now the same university was bestowing its highest honour on me. To make this statement before an Oxford academic audience was one of the high points in my life!

But back to the decision to go to London.... I don't know what prompted it. I think it was in part that I found the cantonment culture very claustrophobic. It was like living in a cloister all the time. The rules and regulations were clear—the people whom one could meet, the subjects of conversation that were considered proper.... I found it restricting and longed to get away. And one of my getaways was when I started to meet people outside of the cantonment culture in Pune.

Pune in those days was, of course, intellectually a lively place, both because of a familiarity with new ideas and with local ideas expressed in Marathi and English. The parochialism that is often apparent today, especially in the activities of the extremist Hindu groups, was not common in those days. I was feeling my way towards a different world. I became very close to a couple of families, who were acceptable to my parents, and yet who had a different vision of what life was about and what one read. For example, my introduction to French and Russian literature came through Aimee and Faly Wadia, and Aimee's sister Perin who was virtually my mentor in aspects of European culture other than the British culture that we had learnt about at school. Ranging further afield they also introduced me to the great Japanese classic, Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*. Years later, I came across her neglected grave tucked away in an obscure part of Kyoto and wrote to the local newspaper complaining about its neglect. I am told that this did have some effect! It was also through them that I was introduced to European classical music.

At the same time, there were my parents' friends who took me to concerts of Hindustani classical music of which Pune was an established centre, and introduced me to the highlights of Bhakti poetry in Marathi which I had not known of before. The concerts were often in the homes of families who lived in the older parts of the city and this lifestyle was in itself a revelation for me.

Those years were a kind of a rollercoaster ride on a variety of cultural forms that left me a little dizzy. Life was full of all these discoveries, somewhat bewildering to begin with, however enticing they actually were. My feeling was that if I could just be on my own for a bit then I could find myself. By then I really was convinced that I did not want to live a conventional cantonment-culture life—you know, marry into the family next door and focus on husband and children for the rest of my life. I wanted more than that, at least for a few years.

RJ: Were you a radical-minded person?

RT: I suppose, I was a radical-minded person for those days, yes. But not greatly so. By the way, I am using radical in its older meaning and not religious extremism, which is the sense in which it is often used today. Given all the talk about freedom and independence, on the one hand, and being a woman in Indian society with all its disadvantages, on the other, it was inevitable that one way out was to become radical. Although I should add that my radicalism has always been more in the way I think and write rather than in outward manifestations. My parents were good about this, in the sense that they didn't create much of a fuss about my aspirations. Partly because by then there were a few young women who were going out of India for an education, and then coming back and dutifully getting married and all the rest of it. I think they saw my going out—as many parents of that time did—as a kind of finishing school. You know, your stock goes up if you've been abroad and come back, and you're more able to cope with life, and so forth. By now my parents might have realized that mine was not going to be a conventional life.

So my father gave me a choice—this was after he'd been transferred from Pune back to Delhi. We'd all moved to Delhi and I was trying to sort myself out in terms of university qualifications. He explained that he had kept aside a certain amount of money for my dowry. The sum was also just about enough to see me through as a student for two years in England. The choice was mine. I could either use it for educating myself in

England, or for a dowry. He added that he was uncertain about the kind of husband he would be able to find for me should I not have a dowry. I was simultaneously angry at the centrality of the dowry, but somewhat amazed at my father offering me a choice. Few fathers at that time did that. My choice was predictable. As far as I was concerned, I decided on the 'fathership', in lieu of a scholarship as we began to call it afterwards, and planned to go abroad for two years.

The university that I could more easily get admission to was London, because Oxford had said I was substandard. And London had a huge choice of histories—one could study anything from the history of Latin America to that of China. They had one branch of Indian history with a specialization in ancient Indian history that seemed attractive, so I decided on that. I applied to SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, and they wrote back to say that if I applied after graduation in India, there would be no problem with the admission. I was desperate, therefore, to get a BA degree. When I came from Pune to Delhi, I walked into one of the best of women's colleges, recently opened, Miranda House. In those days, there was no question of the absurdity of one's qualification marks having to be 90 per cent and above. They were just delighted when a new student joined.

But there were immense problems. Pune University, where I was a student before coming to Delhi, had a four-year course and Delhi had a three-year course, so where was I to be slotted? I had joined the Nowrosjee Wadia College in Pune and taken philosophy honours since those who taught it had excellent reputations, and I was keen on the subject. But the teaching of philosophy in Delhi University in those days was the pits. It was almost as if the most inadequately trained teachers and the worst-possible students went into philosophy and inevitably it was treated as the 'softest option' for some strange, weird reason. Philosophy and psychology were both at the bottom of the list of choices.

Reading Philosophy

RJ: Did you also study Western philosophy?

RT: Yes, there were papers on both Western and Indian philosophy. The contrast in Delhi with Pune was so great that I couldn't come to terms with the change. When I asked if I could switch to doing history or literature honours, I was told firmly I would have to start from the first year and the thought of spending five years in getting a BA degree kept me from switching. But it left me uncertain as to how I was to graduate.

On the other hand, it was such fun to be in Miranda House. I rapidly made friends with a lovely group, or I should say, a gang of outgoing, confident, young women. We spent much of our time taking part in intercollegiate debates, in drama competitions, and goodness knows what, and usually bringing home the trophy. It was just great fun, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself at Miranda House. I spent so much time on extracurricular activities that I inevitably failed in my subsidiary exam for which I had taken history. I still remember the history teacher in Miranda House, Miss Shiva Dua, whom I had taken quite a shine to, who sat me down and said, 'You know child, you're not unintelligent. If you only were to take a little more interest and do some reading, you would be able to do well in history.' I often think of this conversation.

I realized that this would not work, so, after four months of trying, I quit. I was deeply depressed by all this, but my uncle held out hope. He invited me to stay in Shimla with his family and join the Bhargava Municipal College from where I could, in a year's time, sit for the Panjab University BA and get my degree so as to be eligible for admission to London University. All that was required for admission to SOAS was that I be a graduate from a recognized Indian university. So that is what I did. The only honours degree they had in the Bhargava Municipal College was in English literature, and I took that.

RJ: What authors did you discover at that age? Were you interested in Marx or Nietzsche?

RT: Well, I started reading a little bit of Marx, but not too much. Studying philosophy, which is what I started with at Pune University, encouraged one to read the actual texts, but only up to a point. More time was spent on what others had said about the texts. I did some reading largely of secondary works discussing philosophers, and less, perhaps, on reading the works of the philosophers. That was the way we were taught.

And I think another reason why I began to slip away from philosophy was that I went back to what I thought was my first love, which was literature. I was reading many more literary texts, discovering for the first time after school that there was a European tradition of literature, somewhat different from the English with which we had been more familiar. Having done Hindi as another subsidiary at Miranda House, I became interested in Hindi poetry and began reading some of the poets I enjoyed. That was the time when the Sinhalese poet, Tambimuttu, who was in London and New York, was editing a poetry magazine called *Poetry: London–New York*. He had written to various people asking for translations of Indian poetry. And so when I started translating some Hindi poems, just for my own pleasure, I remembered a poem by Mahadevi Varma that had greatly appealed to me and another one by Nirala, both of which I had translated. Some friends sent the translations to Tambimuttu, and to my very pleasant surprise he published them in his anthology on contemporary Indian poetry.

So you see, I was very mixed up at this point as to what I should study and why.

RJ: Did you write poetry yourself?

RT: But of course! Every teenager writes poetry.

RJ: Yes, that's why I'm asking.

RT: Absolutely. I mean, if I wasn't going to be an actress, I was going to be a poet! This was what life was all about. I wrote poems, I preserved them carefully, and now if I happen to read them, I shudder!

RJ: Did you practice any sports, art, anything else? Going to movies?

RT: I rode a lot in my school days and for some time after. Remount regiments still kept horses and these had to be exercised. That suited those of us who wanted to ride and we thought we were helping out with the exercising, although, of course, it was really minimal help. I loved swimming, too, the lazy feel of being buoyed up by the water, and luckily we lived close to a good swimming pool. I played hockey in the women's team at my first college, the Nowrosjee Wadia College in Pune, but we seem to have spent much of our time knocking each other's ankles. Yes, I enjoyed going to the movies….

RJ: What kind of movies?

RT: The usual, the films on the circuit….

RJ: Hollywood classics?

RT: Hollywood classics and the occasional films made by the Bombay Talkies, as it was called in those days. The Raj Kapoor films were beginning to be great hits, so one went and saw them. But movies for me tended to be vaguely rationed, and we went about once a month if that.

I also began to read novels from other literary streams. I read a fair amount of the easily accessible French literature. The more talked about authors were André Gide and Albert Camus, the latter in part, because of his association with Jean-Paul Sartre.

RJ: You knew French.

RT: A little, but not enough to read novels and poetry in the original. I read them in translation. The book that made the deepest impression on me, not just as something thought-provoking, but also as the kind of book that leads one into thinking about the world one lives in and one's view of the world, was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Some degree of radicalization (and I am using the word in its older meaning) regarding the role of women had crept in with the national movement and had influenced my generation. We were curious, for example, about why women were picketing cloth and liquor shops. But for me, this book brought many social attitudes, even of Indian society, into focus. It did not turn me into a feminist, but made me far more sensitive to the issues raised by feminist writers in later decades.

Living in London in the 1950s

RJ: Could we talk about your experience in England? Did you have trouble adjusting when you arrived in London?

RT: I didn't have too much trouble adjusting, partly because I think the cantonment culture had made me somewhat familiar with a few aspects of British life. I had introductions to many people—a few friends of my parents, and, in a larger number, of my brother, and other people whom I had got to know along the way. So that took care of a fair number of what would otherwise have been lonely evenings.

I had accommodation in a women's hostel. It was mainly for British students and I made a couple of friends among them. But there were also about half a dozen from South Asia. We used to get together every Sunday and cook a large pot of *dal*, and then sit and eat *dal* with bread or rice and pickle, and talk about home—what was happening, where we'd come from, what we liked, and so on. It was a friendly little group, but I lost contact with all except one, Kumari Jayawardena, who, in fact, became a significant historian of the history of women and of the intellectual life of Sri Lanka in the colonial period. Kumari and I have remained close even though we only meet when I go to Sri Lanka or we meet elsewhere. The others sort of faded away.

I didn't have too much trouble with life in London although there were some small glitches. I found it a little difficult making friends with the 'British British', but the ones that were a little Europeanized were more accessible. Maybe the former reminded me too much of the British Raj. But I was struck by how different they were on their home ground—not so bossy or assuming airs of superiority. However much I kept telling myself I should be able to be comfortable in England, I was surprised at the degree of resentment I had against the British. And, of course, this was only six years after Independence so there was a hint, and sometimes more than a hint, of condescension on their part and that added to my resentment. I still thought of the British in particular as the colonizers and not of the more amorphous 'West'. This change came later and I remember remarking on it when I went to Oxford in 1968 on a postdoctoral fellowship. By then Britain was the 'West'. Coming home after dining with friends, in the 1950s there would occasionally be the drunk on the bus who would look at me and say, 'Go back to your damn country'. But at the same time, the conductor would come up and say, 'Ignore him he's drunk and don't be frightened, we are here to protect you'. And I would sit back comfortably. Those employed in public services at that time were responsible and helpful. We had all been brought up on the stories of how the working class in England was far friendlier than the middle and upper classes, even though the Indian middle class kept its distance from the British working class. I was talking recently about one's first experience of England with a friend, Romi Khosla, who made the pertinent point that seeing the Englishman on his home ground made us more conscious of our distinctive identity. The infallibility of the 'Brits' was in a sense punctured when we saw them on home ground, and we were conscious of an equal status. We saw the difference not only between 'them' and 'us' as being much less, but they were different on their home ground from the way they had been in the colony.

Indians employed in England at the time were largely of the working class—sailors and dock workers who had settled in a few port towns. I went with some friends to campaign for the Labour Party among such settlements in east London, and I was fascinated with the difference in the lives they were leading as compared to their life at home.

But my big discovery was the Jewish component of British life, about which I had known so little earlier. The cantonment culture did not prepare me for this as we only knew the British as Anglicans or sometimes Catholics, and the broader culture was referred to as Anglo-Saxon. Not that the Jewish religion as such attracted me, but there was something about both the centrality of family relationships and their particular cultural interests that were different. As I became more familiar with it, I was surprised at how influential the Jewish community had been, especially in modern times, to intellectual creativity and innovations not only in Britain, but also in Europe. The Jewish families I met, without making it explicit that they were Jewish, were somehow closer to the kind of background that I was familiar with … you know, families who made me a part of their family, so that I went there for Christmas—even though they were Jewish, they were celebrating Christmas. I would receive invitations from others, too, but somehow there was a difference. So I would become part of these families and that was really heart-warming.

RJ: Was that the first time that you were introduced to Judaism?

RT: I was introduced to Judaism for the first time, yes. I began to understand the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament! And then I remembered the Jewish girls in school, but we never talked about Judaism in school.

RJ: What was fascinating about London in the 1950s?

RT: For me, personally, it was the sheer intoxication of being on my own. The freedom to take decisions according to how I felt, was exhilarating—perhaps because I was young, and at that age one has so much confidence. Occasionally, in my weekly letter to my parents I would say, ‘These are the choices; what do you suggest?’ But then, finally, the decision was mine.

Let me illustrate this with a silly incident, but one that gives a sense of how I reacted. The first time I went to London, I went by ship. This was an entirely new experience, especially of taking decisions from the simplest to the most complicated. For instance, all my life my mother had insisted that I drink a cup of milk for breakfast. I hated milk, so in childhood there were tears and tantrums. But the regimen went on till the day I boarded the ship for London. The first morning on board when I came for breakfast, the steward asked whether I would like tea or coffee. And I looked him straight in the eye and said firmly, 'Black coffee', which I have taken every morning since then. For me, this was a moment of liberation! I was coming out of the chrysalis of parental and cantonment culture.

RJ: Were you conscious about your own rebelliousness?

RT: Yes, I suppose I was, although I never thought of myself as rebellious—just different.

RJ: And it stayed like that for the rest of your life.

RT: It stayed like that for the rest of my life. Yes, I'm afraid so.

RJ: Let us talk about the life you had in London. Do you have any recollections of your professors?

RT: Yes, I do. I was really, in a sense, quite fortunate because I did my work at SOAS (University of London). In those days SOAS as an institution was almost an extension of the colonial office, with which it had close ties. However, when they began to expand their courses from the 1950s, the atmosphere gradually changed and the student common room, for example, hosted not only the exotica of Africa and Asia, but also the reality. At the time when I was there, the classes were small with two or three students, so each lecture was more like a tutorial discussion. This meant that we had quality time with those teaching us, and those that taught us knew their subjects well. I used to be teased at the time about coming all the way to London to study ancient Indian history. I used to have to explain that it was more than just ancient Indian history, as we were being trained as historians and in using our intellect.

In the 1950s, South Asian history was beginning to be taken more seriously in British academia as a subject for research and analyses and was becoming less dependent on colonial readings alone. One of my first tutorials was a comparative review of the historical writings of Vincent Smith and R.C. Majumdar, both fine, respected historians, but with differences. Gradually, I started to understand the framework of colonial and nationalist historians and what this meant in the writing of history. The primary concern of earlier historians had been and quite rightly so to discover information about the past. What happened, and how can we be sure that what is said to have happened actually did happen? Therefore, the reliability of the evidence has to be checked. The other major question was when did it happen? Hence, chronology became an important part of studying ancient history, complicated by the fact that there is so much uncertainty about exact chronologies in ancient India, especially when compared to the exactitude of Chinese sources and the relatively more reliable chronology of Greco-Roman sources.

Nationalist historians, as also colonial historians, were competent in calculating chronology even if there was a slight tendency on the part of some to err on the earlier side. A tutorial on the subject of the date of the *Arthashastra* required us to consult all the major historians and this familiarized us with their work generally—which was an invaluable exercise. We read the best of them—R.G. Bhandarkar, H.C. Raychaudhuri, U.N. Ghoshal, A.S. Altekar, R.C. Majumdar, D.C. Sircar, and Nilakantha Sastri for a start, and among many others. But important as chronology is, one has to be careful not to give it one's whole attention at the expense of other aspects of the past.

Those who taught us South Asian history at SOAS—K. Ballhatchet, P. Hardy, and A.L. Basham—were quite open to a critique of colonial history writing. My incipient anti-colonialism came from growing up with the national movement in India, and when it surfaced in our discussions in tutorials, I did not have the impression that there was an attempt to deliberately dumb it down by those who taught us. Nevertheless, there was an awareness of colonial readings. Presumably, attitudes may have been modified with the coming of Independence. Basham had far more empathy with the subject he taught, perhaps because he came to ancient history by first studying the literature and religions of India. Such studies at that time were seen by some as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian religions. He started life by being singled out as potentially a leading poet of post-War Britain. This later took shape as a flair for literary Sanskrit. The bigger debate in South Asian studies began with the modern history of India where the colonial interpretation was more recognizable. We were beginning to realize that the colonial view of history did not have the answers or, to put it another way, that there might be alternatives to the colonial interpretation of history.

K.M. Panikkar's book, *Asia and Western Dominance*, that was published at the time, created a huge stir as it questioned the hitherto accepted role of European colonialism in Asia. There was much animated discussion of the book. Those teaching modern history were critical of it, but we had more than one seminar to discuss the book in some detail. It was a kind of first step in the direction of what was to eventually come from Edward Said's *Orientalism* two decades later. Panikkar's book did not have the same intellectual control over sources and tended to be more provocative than scholarly, but nevertheless it captured a moment in the thinking of Asian historians that helped change directions in historical research.

It was also the time when A.L. Basham invited D.D. Kosambi to give a course of lectures on Hinduism, and that let off sparks every week.

What I liked most was the training they insisted on: one could notice the difference in the way one began to look at texts. There was no question of doing ancient Indian history without clearing an exam in Sanskrit. And the person who taught Sanskrit at SOAS was one of the best Sanskritists of his time, John Brough. He is also known for his magnificent translations of Sanskrit poetry, not to mention his superbly delicate illustrations of wild flowers. He was really very tough as a teacher. That was the one time when I felt vulnerable, because there were three of us in the class and the other two students were British and had studied Greek and Latin to a high standard. Brough was constantly making comparisons with Greek and Latin grammar and I would sit there saying to myself that I only know the Sanskrit that Shastriji had taught me in Pune, so I could follow the Sanskrit part of it, but the nuances of the grammars of Greek and Latin were beyond me. Brough's lectures brought home to me the fact that Sanskrit was not a stand-alone language and that often it helps to understand the structure of a language better if one is familiar with cognate languages—hence Brough's frequent comparison with Greek and Latin. Unfortunately, we do not encourage our Sanskrit students in India to look beyond Sanskrit. Furthermore, every language has its own intellectual history. This is why I would urge centres of Sanskrit studies to include a couple of well-trained scholars of Greek and Latin, if not other classical languages, which would be an advantage to language studies.

I ended up with attending the classes of both Professor Brough and Dr Grey, the first giving me a feel for the intellectual nuances of the language and the other for its grammar and the reading of the texts. This was an immense help to me over the years, especially when I had to consult a variety of texts in my study of the historical traditions of early India. It also gave me the confidence to deliver the keynote address at the World Sanskrit Conference that was held in Kyoto in 2007 where I spoke on the same subject.

Basham was the person I worked with mainly because he was the professor of ancient history, and I liked the way he taught.

He was the one who said to me, 'Why don't you write an essay, a tutorial essay, every two weeks? That will help you to train yourself to think and write.' This was not required from students as assignments for grading, so I did not need to do this and he did not need to correct it, but he was interested in making me think. This attitude to teaching I found quite remarkable.

My introduction to the Indian historians whom I was to think really highly of and whose work I used in my research also happened in London. There were at least five whom I read with great enthusiasm and consulted regularly, prior to delving into specialized reading. I was deeply impressed by the meticulous use of sources in the work of H.C. Raychaudhuri. His history of ancient India was a fundamental text. I liked U.N. Ghoshal since I thought he made an effort to reach out and provide explanations other than the routine ones. K.A. Nilakantha Shasri I found extremely valuable for the ideas that he developed. Then there were R.C. Majumdar and D.C. Sircar whom I met and talked with, appreciating their familiarity with sources. They were both invited to London in 1956 to what was to become a seminal conference on 'Historical Writing in India, Pakistan and Ceylon'. This was the first time that the notion of historiography was being introduced and applied to a range of historical material. We sat on the sidelines as students glued to everything that was being said. In the evenings, we would get a chance to speak to the 'greats' over a cup of coffee. I still remember the conversations.

I spoke with some trepidation to R.C. Majumdar about my research on Ashoka and was relieved when he said it has been a while since Ashoka had been the subject of research, so he was glad to hear that someone had taken it up and was enthusiastic that I was doing it with Basham who by then had earned the respect of Indian scholars. I used to meet R.C. Majumdar

NARAYAN
National Law

occasionally at conferences, but nevertheless I was surprised and pleased when I had a letter from him in the 1960s enquiring whether I would join the advisory board of the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training, established by the Ministry of Education) in connection with writing school textbooks. D.C. Sircar was his usual jovial self. He twitted me about sitting in London and doing a PhD on Ashoka. When I told him I was about to leave for a field study and had planned to visit every site of an Ashokan inscription in India—although the ones in Pakistan were not accessible—he suddenly became concerned. He asked me for the details of how I was going and who was accompanying me and seemed satisfied with the arrangements, but added that I should be very careful as some sites were in distant and difficult places. I was touched by his concern. He was another person whom I later met at conferences in India. On one occasion, I even wrote to him about the Panguraria Ashokan inscription and dared to say that I did not agree with a small part of his reading and gave my reading. He disagreed with me, but was gracious in his reply.

My research on Ashoka involved using sources from Sri Lanka, especially the two Pali chronicles—the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*. Fortunately for me Charles Godakumbara and Leslie Pereira were both visiting scholars at SOAS so I could read and discuss the texts with them. Leslie Pereira's grasp of the chronicles was most impressive.

Also present at SOAS and working on PhDs were two of Basham's prize students—R.S. Sharma and A.K. Narain. That was where I first met them and there were many conversations over cups of coffee. R.S. Sharma would speak of history with the dynasties kept at a distance. He always encouraged me in my research and even more so later when we were teaching at universities in Delhi. I appreciated the fact that on occasion when he disagreed with my interpretation, we would have a gentle discussion on the subject. A.K. Narain introduced me to the Oxus valley and the Indo-Greeks, and made me aware of the significance of numismatics. Now, when I look back on those years I feel I was really privileged to have been able to discuss issues with the foremost historians of ancient India. Among other contemporaries also doing research degrees were Devahuti who was working on Harsha and Sirima Kiribamune on the later chronicles of Sri Lanka. I used to enjoy chatting with Devahuti about our respective theses, so I was quite taken aback at her later hostility to my kind of history. She and S.P. Gupta organized the History and Culture Society as a counter to what they called the leftist history that some of us were accused of propagating. Good historical writing seems to have bypassed this organization!

The SOAS library in those days was not nearly as grand and accessible as it is now. It was compressed into a few rooms with shelves that went from floor to ceiling. Books at the topmost shelves could only be reached by climbing up a rather rickety wooden step-ladder. So Sirima Kiribamune and I had an agreement that if either of us had to use the ladder the other would accompany her and hold the ladder for the other to climb. This was true academic bonding and perhaps explains why she and I have remained close friends!

It was at about this time that I realized the importance of archaeology to the study of ancient history. My interest had been aroused by Gordon Childe's lectures at the Institute of Archaeology. A little later I did a vacation job for Raymond Allchin. He had brought back a sack-load of potsherds from sites in Afghanistan and wanted drawings made of the more impressive ones. This I began to do and it made me realize why pottery is so important to the excavation of a site. To understand the nature of pottery more fully, I took a one-semester course on making pottery at the Stanhope Institute of Art and came close to keeping it going for much longer.

But my most effective teacher in archaeology was B.K. Thapar and this happened a decade later. Back in Delhi I was complaining to him one day about the difficulty of reading excavation reports and following the technical discussions. He told me that the only way out was to join an excavation and do it seriously. So for three months each year over a period of three years I joined the excavation at the site of Kalibangan, a Harappan urban settlement in northern Rajasthan, conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). I arrived there by the slowest of slow trains as it really was the back of beyond. The first morning I was taken to the cemetery area and was told to start excavating a grave. BK carefully explained the procedure to me. I was to dig and do so slowly and as soon the grave furniture in the form of pots appeared, I should call him for fresh instructions. This took a couple of weeks and when the pottery appeared I switched to a small excavation knife and, of course, when the skeleton appeared, I had to switch again, this time to a surgical knife. The moment when I held the first pot in my hands was unforgettable. I was holding something last held by someone four thousand years ago. It was like touching the past. At the same time I was taught how to organize the data from a grave. I was later transferred to the habitation site. At the end of the three seasons I was able to read excavation reports without getting muddled. But the bonus was that every evening after work, BK and I would sit in his tent and he would explain what I had done during the day in greater detail. His lucidity and patience in explaining typologies, materials, and functions was most impressive. This was an amazing education in both the theoretical information and applied excavation that has stood me in good stead every time I have had to read an excavation report or visit a site. The further bonus was that BK and I belonged to the same lineage of Khatri Panjabis. He had investigated the history of the Thapars, so in between archaeology I got to know about my own extended history. But all this was a decade later and I was still at SOAS doing my PhD.

Whilst doing my BA at SOAS, I had never thought seriously of becoming a historian or even of becoming an academic. I was in London just to enjoy being in the hub of the universe, because for me that's what London was then. Everything was within reach. I did a course on Chinese art and archaeology, which I never would have been able to do in India. And that was right out of the blue! I knew nothing about China except that I thought the calligraphy of the ideograms was aesthetically outstanding, but I wanted to know more, so I did the course and learnt at least the rudiments of the language as well. It was an amazingly accurate prelude to a visit I was fortunate enough to make to China in 1957, where I went as a research assistant to an art historian and we worked for two months at two Buddhist cave sites.

And the joy of being in London was also the vast array of interests that one could pick from, such as exhibitions, concerts, lectures, jazz clubs, and also the variety of people one could meet. Basham would often say to me, 'The problem with you is you have too many interests'. And this again has been a problem all my life. I have too many interests! But there it was.

And then there was another person who was intellectually absolutely stunning. I had a paper in political thought, and the tutor in political thought at SOAS was Otto van der Sprenkel, who mimed Groucho Marx and spent much of the time in tutorials telling us about the Marx Brothers' films! He told me about the young lecturer in Birkbeck College, Eric Hobsbawm, who had the reputation of being brilliant, so why didn't I attend his lectures on political thought. I did so and I was completely blown. He was just so good, so good. He spoke about the entire span of nineteenth-century thinkers and not just of Marx, which was a way of intelligently situating the ideas that Marx developed. And I used to sit there and think, 'Will there ever be a chance in my life that I'll actually discuss some of these themes with him?' And I ended up being among his many good friends.

Becoming a Historian

RJ: Did Hobsbawm initiate you in Marxism?

RT: No, he didn't, but he certainly made Marxism far more exciting than anyone in India had. In India, it had become a dogma. In talking to Marxists there was a sense of having to understand it because it was the only answer to all problems. The sense of mission was strong. But with Eric, the best thing about all his lectures was that there was a sense of exploration, of explanation, and a method of discovery in the realm of ideas. That appealed to me enormously.

RJ: So when did you really start reading Marx seriously and start considering the methodology as something that you could use in your own work?

RT: Well, I never really read Marx systematically. I dipped into various writings here and there, largely as I came across references to them in other writings. And again, the methodology was one where on a particular issue I would read three or four people who had written on it, and then pick out what I thought was relevant for that issue. So it has never been the case that I sat down and said, 'This is the method that I'm going to apply'. It was really much more, 'What are the questions that other people—and that included the Marxists—are asking? Can I ask these questions of my sources? What are the new questions that my reading is giving rise to?'

RJ: At that time did you start reading the works of E.H. Carr, E.P. Thompson ... you were familiar with these works?

RT: Yes. I was familiar with Carr in particular. But at the same time I also read Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood, and history began to change from being just a narrative to becoming something of a puzzle about the past.

RJ: But did you also have the chance to attend some lectures at Cambridge and Oxford?

RT: My visits to Cambridge and Oxford were really just to meet friends, and to enjoy being there. But I didn't attend lectures there partly because there were so many lectures to attend in London. London was just full of activities in all the colleges: every week there was something going on. For example, the political science lectures were in Birkbeck. Then I also attended occasional lectures at the London School of Economics. I attended some on the background to British history at King's College that I found useful in providing a context to colonialism. And then, of course, there was University College nearby with many speaking on Greco-Roman history and these were useful for comparative studies. I remember being struck by the fact that British writers who had used Greco-Roman material in the context of Indian studies, such as Vincent Smith and W.W. Tarn, had had theories about classical history that were now being questioned by more recent work.

RJ: Were you familiar with the work of Moses Finley at the time?

RT: I became much more familiar with his work in the 1960s. I read a lot of Moses and had discussions with him when I went to Cambridge a little later. After I came back to India in 1961, I went through problems settling into a worthwhile job, until I finally joined Delhi University. Then I had a post-doctoral fellowship in Oxford, 1967–8 at Lady Margaret Hall. And that was the time when I really familiarized myself with aspects of

Greco-Roman history as part of a comparative study. That was when I began to get a feel of premodern European history and saw it from a comparative perspective. This was the result of many conversations with Rosalie Colie, Susan Reynolds, and later Simon Price in Lady Margaret Hall. Susan and I continue to be close friends and I have been interested in her questioning of the concept of feudalism. This has been the main theme of her work on medieval Europe and is now, after a couple of decades, being given serious attention. I also attended the weekly seminars of Arnaldo Momigliano in London, which were on aspects of Greco-Roman history with an emphasis on historiography. I was inducted into his circle of friends most of whom worked on early Europe, and, in particular, Sally Humphries, Peter Brown, and Keith Hopkins. That was also when I met Moses Finley in Cambridge. But this was in the 1960s and 1970s, which was the time when historians writing in the journal *Past and Present* were continuing to explore new ways of investigating the past.

RJ: At what point did you really focus on your work on ancient Indian history?

RT: Well, that was to begin with accidental. SOAS allowed me to do my BA honours in two years instead of three because I already had an honours degree. So when I completed this after two years, I was desperate to stay on in London because I just loved being there, and was enjoying it so much.

RJ: But your father was asking you to come back?

RT: My parents were asking me to come back. They were also becoming anxious about difficulties in finding me a husband as I was getting on in years. I kept saying, 'Never mind about that, I'll do that myself'.

But anyway. I was undecided about being an academic, and I was floundering around trying to find out what I wanted to do.

I couldn't find a job. Because in those days, an Indian woman looking for a job in London — where would she go? I wrote to my brother and asked him whether I should go in for journalism and he wrote back saying, 'No! You're not cut out for journalism, don't try it.' He was obviously quite right although I now find it amusing because I am being invited to do regular columns by leading newspapers, but that is not for me!

And then Basham suggested I apply for a research fellowship. I didn't think I would stand a chance, as at London University there would have been hundreds applying to all the various branches of history. I was also worried about having then to become an academic, which was not exactly compellingly attractive. But since there seemed to be no alternative, I put in for a fellowship. I was called for interview and grilled for almost an hour. Three weeks later I received a letter informing me that I had been awarded a research fellowship to do a PhD.

So then I was stuck! If I wanted to stay in London, I had to do a PhD; there was no way out. I then started thinking seriously about becoming an academic. And that was really when I—for the first time decided I was going to be a historian. But until then I was undecided.

RJ: What was the title of your dissertation?

RT: It was called 'Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas'. It was primarily on Ashoka Maurya.

RJ: And you did it with whom?

RT: Basham.

Return to India

RJ: When did you get back to India?

RT: I got back at the beginning of 1961. After I finished my PhD in 1958, SOAS asked me if I'd like to stay on and teach at SOAS, which I did. This was a temporary position. After two years I decided to return to India.

I was anyway uncertain about whether I wanted to stay permanently or return, and there were personal reasons as well, pulling both ways. So I decided it was time to come back, feel the waters, and then decide. So I came back at the beginning of 1961.

RJ: When did you start teaching at JNU?

RT: JNU didn't exist then. I had hoped to get a job in the Deccan College in Pune, and I went there to discuss the possibilities with Professor H.D. Sankalia. My choice of Pune was because I still had happy memories of living there and more than that the Deccan College had strong departments in the study of ancient India. His response was discouraging when he said that although I was well-qualified, my not being a Maharashtrian might stand in the way. This puzzled me as there were non-Maharashtrians teaching there, so clearly there were other reasons. Perhaps independent women were not appreciated, as I discovered, in other places as well. I came away disappointed.

I had been offered a job at the newly established Kurukshetra University in Haryana, so I decided to be a pioneer and go there. Everybody advised me not to go as there was nothing there—only one building, no students, no library, half a dozen teachers, with six faculty houses. But I was stubborn and told myself that I had returned in order to pioneer new ways of thought in the subject I was to teach and not just live comfortably in Delhi. So I went, and I was miserable there because there really was just nothing. It was a wilderness. And I had signed a contract with Penguin to write the first volume of the Penguin History of India, and I was getting very worried because there was no library I could consult. So I used to come every weekend on a Saturday afternoon, collect books from a library in Delhi, and go back on Sunday, and then spend the week reading. After a year and a half I couldn't stand it any more and gave up. The positive result of these months was that it gave me a limited acquaintance with small-town and rural life in Panjab and Haryana. I then took up a fellowship in Delhi. Whilst I was on the fellowship, Delhi University advertised a position; I applied for it and was appointed.

RJ: You started teaching ancient Indian history at Delhi University in 1963?

RT: Yes.

RJ: How did you find your students at the time? Were they interested in ancient history?

RT: On the whole, not markedly so. And nor were the teachers terribly interested in what they taught, with a few exceptions. What I had to say about providing alternative and newer courses were regarded as my idiosyncrasies. The history taught was virtually all political and dynastic history and I tried, together with half a dozen teachers from the colleges, Bipan Chandra being among them, to introduce some more detailed optional courses on social and economic history. This brought objections from the majority who dismissed us as Marxists trying unnecessarily to bring in new courses. Whoever had heard of social and economic history being taught at MA level, they asked? We tried hard with endless debates, discussions, and teach-ins, but to no avail. We tried to introduce regular seminars and discussion meetings, but all this was seen as too newfangled and the interest was minimal. Part of the problem was that the department itself lacked historians with a vision of what the subject could be other than the routine narrative of what happened in the past. This was one of the reasons why I quit and joined JNU, in 1970. Teaching history at Delhi University was not exactly inspiring at that time. Now, of course, with a change of historians it is among the best departments of history in the country.

But my years at Delhi University taught me much from lively social scientists in other departments. It was not as if I was a committed Marxist wanting to change the courses. I had an interest in the Marxist approach to history, but it was in the context of other theories of explanation that were then current. It seemed to me out of all the different theories of explanation that were being offered, such as those of Max Weber, or the Annales School, which were the other two that had produced scholars who had worked on Indian sources, and Sanskrit sources in particular, this theory offered greater possibilities of explorable explanations. I was interested in all of these.

But, of course, it was the 1960s, and everyone was talking about Marxism as good, bad, or indifferent. So one was caught up in the current of having to read and having to discuss it.

Marx and Marxism

RJ: Were you politically committed?

RT: I wasn't politically committed, no. I mean I was broadly left-of-centre, but that was all.

RJ: As an intellectual?

RT: Yes.

RJ: What was your political attitude towards the Soviet Union? The Cuban Revolution?

RT: I was interested to hear about them as experiments in varieties of socialisms, but did not spend time on details.

Perhaps I found the Cuban Revolution more interesting because it was contemporary, although obviously the Russian had had a bigger fall-out effect. I had been to the Youth Festival in Warsaw in 1955, and the slogans of *Mir and Druzhba*—peace and friendship—were all over the place. After a week I thought I had had enough and decided to travel in Europe as it was vacation time, and I had not registered for a PhD as yet. I was not committed to the slogans although it was worth the visit to meet various kinds of people and hear about their experiences.

Generally, but not invariably, my reactions have been what would be regarded as left-of-centre. I have been uncomfortable with right-wing politics and what they regard as solutions, although I have read right-wing books with interest, and have discussed issues with those who think differently from me. This also extends to a few friendships.

RJ: Did you ever have an ideological stand on Marxism?

RT: In what way?

RJ: I mean, since you were not politically committed, were you more interested in Marxism as a philosophy of history.

RT: I was interested in Marxism as a philosophy of history rather than only as political ideology. I was more interested in Marxism providing possible ways of understanding society and also of understanding the past. I never considered joining a political party.

RJ: Were you familiar with all the liberal critics of Marxism like Isaiah Berlin or Raymond Aron?

RT: Yes, inevitably one read the views of people who disagreed but argued in an intelligent way. Some of it did raise questions in my mind, though by and large I had the feeling that because the socialist experiment was a new experiment, people were suspicious of it and, therefore, casting doubts on it. And I was sympathetic to a socialist society because I thought it would be a way of solving the many problems of Indian society. From time to time as questions arose, I inevitably had second thoughts on some aspects, but on broad principles I often agreed. One has had a lifetime to observe how it has been made to work and how it can be distorted. Hence, one becomes cautious and assesses what is being attempted from new perspectives. But in those days, yes, there was a lot of enthusiasm for that kind of....

RJ: I think we need to be clear on that because I have a sense that when you talk about socialism, especially in India, you have a Nehruvian stand.

RT: That is approximately correct. I would certainly not want it to get mixed up with the Stalinist view. I mean the Stalinist position was a position I was always unhappy with because it was founded on excessive control, regimentation, and even distortion of the essential meaning of socialism, not to mention the lack of humanism. I do believe socialism can succeed provided it comes with humanism. And I began to notice it, particularly, when I met Russian Indologists as I found there was a kind of singular way of approaching the past, almost as if the answers were already known. So there were a few Russian Indologists whom I could talk to quite freely, but there were others with whom there was a barrier of thought. The occasional ones that were willing to explore new ways and had creative ideas, generally did not have the state support to visit India all that often. That was an indication that if a system produces an intellectual narrowness, then that system is in trouble.

RJ: How much were you familiar with the Soviet history?

RT: Hardly with the history of the USSR. What came out of the USSR was frequently written to order by Soviet historians and this I found boring, and nor was I particularly interested in the history of Russia. But I did read what they wrote about India and often had problems with it.

RJ: But you were certainly familiar with novels like Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*....

RT: Yes. I was familiar with that.

RJ: What did you think about it?

RT: Well, my initial reaction was that perhaps it was exaggerated. Later I began to see it was exaggerated in parts, but also seemed to have some interesting takes. I mean, obviously this became clear when certain subjects surfaced.... For example, an event took place in London that I witnessed and it concerned the much-respected Marxist Rajani Palme Dutt, who was also admired for his impressive grasp in understanding modern India. When the famous twentieth Congress took place in the Soviet Union, and Khrushchev criticized Stalin, Palme Dutt was present at that meeting. On his return to London, he addressed a public meeting in Hampstead and many of us went to hear him. I remember that as an occasion when I began to wonder what was going on. We had all heard the reports of what Khrushchev had said, but Palme Dutt kept talking about how the price of shoes had come down, and the price of food had come down, and avoided the issue until people started shouting, and booing, and holding up chairs, and saying, 'We're not interested in that, we're interested in what Khrushchev said!' Then the story came out. And then Hungary happened. That was a time when one began to say, 'Well, maybe it wasn't all that exaggerated, maybe there is something that needs to be re-examined'. And somehow I lost the interest I had had earlier in these forms of socialism as the forms to be emulated. So although socialism remained a pattern of existence that I was advocating for India, the model was never the Soviet one.

Teaching at JNU

RJ: Just one last question to finish this chapter. When did you start teaching at JNU?

RT: When JNU was opened in 1970, I was offered a chair and I moved there.

RJ: Until you retired?

RT: Until I retired.

RJ: How was the environment at JNU when you compared it with other universities in India?

RT: I can only repeat what I have often said. It was intellectually the most exciting period of my life. The environment initially at JNU was unbelievably challenging. We were fortunate that in the Centre for Historical Studies, or CHS, we had a group of very bright historians. We were anxious to set up the best-possible centre for the study of history with high academic standards and were supported by a vice chancellor, Mr G. Parthasarathy, who was equally anxious that the best should be made available. By best I mean courses and syllabi that forced students to read and do some quality thinking about the subject. We were determined not to drown it in dull courses characterized by mediocre thought. The initial three who got it going were Sarvepalli Gopal, Bipan Chandra, and myself. Satish Chandra was soon called away to be chairman of the University Grants Commission. The other earlier historians were those who have contributed to the study of fundamental structures of Indian history such as K.N. Panikkar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Harbans Mukhia, R. Champakalakshmi, and B.D. Chattopadhya. Among the first of our PhDs to join the faculty were Muzaffar Alam, Majid Siddiqui, and Shereen Ratnagar. For comparative history, Madhavan Palat specialized in Russian history. Subsequently, further thoughtful scholars joined the faculty. The two non-historians who worked with us were a great asset. One was K. Meenakshi, a linguist trained in both Sanskrit and Tamil and taught both to our students, and Satish Saberwal, the sociologist whom we almost converted to becoming a historian! I learnt much from both of them when I consulted them on my current work.

The ambience of the CHS was a liberal space where a range of sources, ideas, and theories could be debated as indeed they were, day after day, as we discussed the contents of the syllabus and courses. It continued in the next few years in our frequent conversations with our students. Occasionally, such discussions also took place whilst some of us were being *gheraoed* by students when there were differences in perceptions regarding the university! The basic liberal values underlining the intellectual content of what we debated were generally endorsed, and the person amongst us who ensured this maximally was Sarvepalli Gopal. Initially, this ambience was shared by the other centres and this is what allowed JNU to grow into a rather special university, different from others, where democratic and liberal discussions were regarded as normal processes in the making of thinking people. Unfortunately, the current administrators of the JNU (2016) seem to confuse a university with a *patashala* (nursery school), and are opposed to the idea of questions and debates as part of the normal activities of a university.

We were encouraged in the 1970s to create a unique syllabus and not just repeat the courses that were being taught in other universities. So in a sense, at a personal level, my desire to be a pioneer that initially took me to Kurukshetra and eventually had to be discarded, came to fruition in JNU. I couldn't do it in Kurukshetra, I couldn't do it in Delhi University, but in JNU it was possible. And that was the exciting thing about JNU.

One could explore areas of knowledge and one could discuss these explorations with people who were knowledgeable and willing to explore ideas. Furthermore, if they rejected one's argument, they did so because they thought it was intellectually not feasible—the historical explanation was faulty. The process of working out new but viable courses was an exercise in exploring history, but on the basis of intense discussions with the historians in the CHS. In this process I learnt so much, partly from their criticism of, or their reasons for, accepting what was being suggested, and partly from having to be clear about what I was suggesting.

History as a social science was different from history as Indology, since the context had widened and there was a broader range of sources and of causes and explanations of events. These could come from other disciplines, as, for example, from demography in trying to estimate the population of cities of the Indus civilization, or from economic anthropology in ascertaining how one assesses the meaning of gift exchange between two categories of people. Such information, even if not precise in itself, moved the study towards trying to find more precise information by using new methods of enquiry. It also focused on the activities of individuals and entities in themselves or as social groups and introduced another perspective of human behaviour. Treated in an interdisciplinary manner, historical events were imbued with many more meanings than before. In short, we were teaching history at a qualitative level that was at the time new to most Indian universities.

There was also a different policy of admission at JNU. A small percentage of students from economically underprivileged backgrounds could be admitted. This introduced awareness among teachers and students on the range of students that could have access to university education and made the Indian social reality more immediate.

Apart from this the ambience in the early years of JNU, which is still present, was that it was a space for thinking through ideas; the relative lack of hierarchy in personal relationships within university centres; and in reminding ourselves that we were an institution located in a society, and it is necessary that as academics we comment on the actions and words of the larger society. I have always felt that the sense of being connected with the larger society was greater in JNU than in most other universities.

II

The Function of the Historian

Reading the Past

RJ: Let us talk about the function of the historian in general and more precisely about your approach to history. I would like to start this chapter with a quote by E.H. Carr, which you actually add to one of your articles, 'The Contribution of Kosambi to Indology'. According to E.H. Carr, 'The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present'. It seems to me you have taken this stand as a historian of early India.

RT: I think up to a point that is so. I consciously moved away, for example, from the earlier position that projected 'ancient India' as the 'golden age', a utopia. It was depicted as an age when people lived well, there was little disharmony, and society functioned in an orderly fashion. This picture was based in part on treating normative texts as descriptions of reality. A golden age was necessary to the ideology of nationalism. As we know, history is essential to all nationalisms in constructing an identity for the nation. Hobsbawm puts it rather pithily when he says history is to nationalism what the poppy is to the opium addict. It is a source. It inspires. It helps in the crafting of an identity. And all nationalisms need one period in the past that is believed to be the utopia that they hope will return if they succeed. Hence the need for a Periclean Athens for various European nationalisms and the Ch'in empire for the Chinese. And, of course, it's very convenient if it's at the beginning, because early history generally has fewer sources with historical certainties that might contradict the fantasies that are generally built around such golden ages.

And so there was, associated with Indian nationalism, a fantasizing about the brilliance of the 'utopian' conditions that existed in the ancient period. It was something that bothered me for two reasons. One was that in the course of training to be a historian I became interested in archaeology and started participating in excavations. What struck me was that, even with something like the Harappan culture that we speak of as magnificent, and comment on how prosperous people were and all that, when we see the actuality, we're dealing with houses made of mud bricks and simple living. It would be the kind of living that one associates today with a small town rather than a magnificent city. One has to keep reminding oneself that one is referring to a different kind of material culture from that of the present. And I began to ask myself whether we were perhaps exaggerating the descriptions because we were constructing the foundations of our civilization? The cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt revealed fabulously wealthy objects from temple sites and graves of the same or earlier periods. Compared to those the Harappan remains suggested that a smaller amount of wealth was being produced. Yet in terms of civic and urban organization the sophistication of the Harappan cities is striking. So the magnificence may lie in something other than temples and graves.

When the excavation of a site is compared to the description of the same place in a literary text, the comparison is again problematic. We historians tend to impose the literary description onto the archaeological site. It's what a friend of mine referred to as 'the tyranny of the text over archaeology'. The text describes a site, but it need not be an exact description. There was a tendency some years ago to repeat and accept as real the description in the text, but now there is far less dependence on the text for accurate descriptions. Although, of course, the incidence and degree of a fit between the two sources does vary. Seeing the excavations at early sites also mentioned in texts and comparing what one sees with the literary descriptions, leads one often to ask whether literary descriptions were really accurate or are we ignoring poetic licence? This is not an Indian problem alone as it concerns other ancient excavated sites that are described in texts as well.

The other problem relates to social evolution. This is a complex problem on which there has been much debate in recent times, so let me expand on it a little. We all read Gordon Childe as students, and the notion of social evolution was extremely influential. Childe was the first person who made me see the end purpose of archaeology, although, of course, his view has been overtaken by other ideas and theories and the end purpose has undergone many changes. However, I still find his ideas both provocative and well-reasoned, but, of course, the evidence has changed since the time he wrote. Archaeologists discussed tangible, three-dimensional objects as items of evidence unlike the abstract items drawn from texts that historians of ancient history write about. To be able to touch the objects that were made two and three millennia ago is an entirely different experience from trying to mentally visualize them from descriptions in texts. This aspect of archaeology remains a corrective to literary description and raises a different set of questions for the historian. One reads the splendid description of the city of Ayodhya in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki or Hastinapur and Indraprastha in the *Mahabharata*, and then the excavations at these sites reveal a rather pedestrian habitation of those times. One looks in vain for the extraordinary palace built by Asura Maya.

Some of us were avidly reading Tyler and the early anthropologists, and Engels, and even *The Golden Bough*, in trying to understand how ancient societies were different from our own. One of the questions that bothered me in those days was that if society was barbaric or savage, or at any rate not civilized to begin with, then how did civilization come about? What was the reality of that society? And that makes one question the more fanciful descriptions. But I was quite aware that those of us who were arguing for a more realistic picture of a past society were treading on the toes of those who believed the descriptions from literary texts to be accurate.

On the question of social evolution, I have always argued that societies change and, yes, there is a variation in the change that has more to do with why and how each one changes, rather than each following the same pattern. One is observing parallel patterns of change within an overall structure that follows the basic rule: at the crudest level one can argue that simple uncomplicated societies may continue more or less as they are, or they may gradually change into more complex societies and the degrees of complexity may increase. Evolution, as we know, is not strictly linear. Archaeology can help to clarify the forms that societies take as cultures, that is, patterns of living. There are hunter–gatherers, there are pastoralists, there are farmers, and there are people settled in towns, to mention just a few. The question is whether every society has to go through these stages or can some be skipped or follow a somewhat varied pattern. Nor are they rigidly confined to this framework. Many pastoralists have agriculture as a necessary subsidiary, and often the subsidiary becomes the dominant pattern. Vedic society is, therefore, referred to as agro-pastoral as were many other societies of that time and some still are. This is a different pattern from the urban centres of Harappan times where the city was dependent on the surrounding agricultural production, which may explain the need for granaries in the city. Significantly, the Vedic corpus does not describe the high sophistication of urban living as indicated by the archaeology of Harappan cities. I am referring, for example, to the stratification of the cities in terms of the layout of the citadel and residential areas, the street plans, the drainage, the architecture of houses, the cemeteries. Urban settlements are generally more varied than other kinds of settlements since they are not so dependent on the ecology of their location. The human intervention in the making of towns can introduce new patterns. However, the basic requirements of city living tend to be similar in many parts of the world.

All these societies have contexts that determine their form. Every society has to respond in various ways to the environment in which it lives, which creates its pattern of living, and which becomes an agency of some degree of change from one society to another. People live by hunting and gathering in the tropics and in the ice-bound tundra regions. Their aspirations may be similar, but they go about achieving them in different ways. Change also comes with the use of new technologies or new ways of organizing social structure and economy. The historian has to explain the change from stone tools to metal tools which was a quantum leap, and within this, the change from copper–bronze to iron which was also a striking innovation. The study of technological innovations and what are now being called inventions of proto-science are crucial to understanding patterns of living and also to the patterns of thinking of a society. This was revealed most effectively by Joseph Needham in his multivolume *Science and Civilization in China*. This is an enterprise that we need to undertake in relation to Indian history as well, both to understand and contextualize our knowledge and activities in the premodern world, and to rid ourselves of the ridiculous claims we make about 'our' having modern scientific inventions many centuries before they were discovered in the modern world. Interdisciplinary studies help to explain the technological base of a culture that in turn helps us understand its activities and, up to a point, also its thinking. Predictably, such studies require the expertise of scientists, historians, and archaeologists. Given that archaeological studies in particular are becoming more dependent on the sciences than on the study of texts alone, as was the case earlier, this interaction may be useful. Using methods of scientific analyses on ancient artefacts is a way of extending the information available from them as well as suggesting new ways of assessing the data. In some environmental studies, it has led to fresh ideas on historical causation.

Where the social sciences contribute further is in answering questions such as what were the resources used by the society under study; who had control over them; and who actually laboured to produce what was required from these resources. How was the relationship between these two groups defined? In what way did the social norms help to create, continue, and contribute to, or alternately obstruct, the pattern of living at varying levels of the society? Were there belief systems that arose from these patterns; were they distinct, and sometimes perhaps carrying over the beliefs of earlier patterns and reformulating them? What were the external forms in which thoughts were expressed, be it painting, sculpture, literature, or philosophy and who were they representing in this expression? These are questions that have a bearing on delineating the pattern, but they cannot be studied in the abstract—chronos-free and without a location. They have to be rooted in space and time. Archaeological data coming from the excavation of settlements also focuses on the pattern of living of the people who create that culture and it covers a wider social range than just the culture of the elite. It adds to the image we derive from literary sources. And so the questions go on increasing, the canvas is stretched out further, and the historian has to grapple with a wider spread of information and inquiry.

Is There a Pattern in History?

RJ: Are you persuaded that history can be seen and analysed as a whole, not just because there are laws of history, but because history has a structure and a pattern?

RT: I think there are distinctive patterns in each part of history. I would not argue that all histories have a structure and a pattern that is identical and, therefore, immediately recognizable, because I think there are variants of many kinds. When you begin to look at history in terms of 'Did society change? Is there a pattern?', then you have to look more realistically at the past. The historian would have to cut out the flab of fantasy no matter how attractive and comforting it may be. And that was what, I think, made me question the kind of picture that had been built up earlier. Of course, at the time when the first modern histories of India were written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the discussion of patterns in a society were not at the fore. Evolution as an analytical category had not entered historical explanations of the Indian past, although it had been applied to European history.

The past was studied more in terms of a curiosity about what was there before us, rather than trying to trace a pattern; or for that matter to try and understand where we have come from and where we are at now. The intrinsic link between the past and the present—and the fact that the present grows out of the past and, therefore, the patterns of past societies are important to our understanding of present-day societies—was a train of thought that was generally absent.

NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA (NB): Can the historian ever master the past? Is not the expression of such a desire premised on a nineteenth-century positivist notion of mastery which Carr is struggling against, but cannot get away from?

RT: I don't think Carr is arguing that mastering the past means controlling it, as that is obviously not possible unless by control one means controlling how we understand the past. I think we imagine that ideally it would be good to master the past in terms of understanding it, because that's how one justifies being a historian: it means being curious about the past, getting to know and understand it, and, where need be, to relate it to the present. That is why one studies history. The intention is to study history to understand the past. And better understanding means there are probably some aspects that one thinks one has mastered and others that one doesn't understand.

NB: But there can always be a counterstory, a different narrative, a conflict of interpretations.

RT: There can certainly be a counterstory. In fact, I think the maturing of history as a discipline draws on the process of explanation and counter-explanation, provided there is evidence for both and it's not just fantasy in either case. So one is ready for that, one is ready for the counterstory, but one assumes that given the amount of knowledge we have, given the sources and evidence we have, a certain understanding of the past is moving towards what we think of as a mastery over at least some aspects of the past. And we have to keep in mind the difference in how early history is reconstructed as compared to modern history. For early times, there is a relative shortage of data and it tends to be quite diverse and scattered. I used to tell my ancient history students that they should begin by reading a detective story by Agatha Christie, since the initial procedure in reconstructing ancient history was in many ways parallel to solving a murder mystery. This was a contrast to modern history where there is a plethora of data and the problem lies in sorting and selecting what one wishes to use.

NB: I think the main emphasis of Carr is on understanding the past, with an eye to the present. That is, being aware of the politics of history....

RT: Absolutely. Understanding the past both in itself and as a key to the present, but with a larger focus on the past.

NB: ... and you continue to believe it today.

RT: Yes.

NB: But the first part of the argument is something possibly that we need to rethink....

RT: The mastery part.

NB: Yes, the question of mastery. Your own studies now show that in the writing of history there is always a play of interpretations. You have been exploring the different narratives of the past, the structures of these narrations, the implication of a specific rendering of the past. Conflict of interpretation is part of the politics of history that you are talking about. Doesn't that undercut the idea of mastery?

RT: Yes. But I think, to put it slightly differently, I think Carr is using the term 'mastery' in a different sense, and I was certainly reading it in a different sense—that I wasn't thinking of 'mastery' being, literally, knowing everything about the past, but the tendency to say, 'You have to know a great deal before you can talk about the past'.

What Is a Historical Fact?

RJ: E.H. Carr distinguishes between 'facts of the past' and 'historical facts'. According to him, only historical facts can be historicized by the position of the historian. Do you agree with him on this level?

RT: Well, I don't know, because I'm aware of the debate now on the question of 'What is a historical fact?' A long time ago we took statements based on evidence as historical facts, quoted the evidence literally, and took the fact for granted. Now it has become a more complex question because, after all, we do realize that historical facts can be culled from the way a historian understands a problem. Whether or not one calls it a fact is another development of that argument, which does take one into a kind of hermeneutics, reflecting on 'What is a fact?' and 'What is a historical fact?' and 'How is a historical fact created?'. History is based on what is ultimately abstract information, whereas archaeology is the study of the tangible: this contrast is crucial. However, the abstractions are not figments of the imagination as they have to be rooted in evidence. The evidence is collated from as many sources as possible and these may well be varied.

A historical fact could refer to an event in the past. It has to be read and put into a context. Readings may differ in terms of explaining what an event means. The 'why' and 'how' also has to be considered in a discussion of a historical fact and this makes it complicated. If a fact refers to what happened in the past then its having happened has to be certain and this requires that the reliability of the evidence be checked; possible comparisons with other similar situations can be used in analysing the fact.

History and archaeology are not exact sciences, but there is a constant search for methods to improve reliability. The application of new methods to test reliability can, therefore, make a difference between what was taken as a fact in the nineteenth century and what is taken as a fact today. The degree of difference varies. The discovery of new evidence can contribute to this, but equally the use of new methods of investigation at arriving at historical generalizations can provide new ways of thinking about it. Those who remain rooted in the nineteenth-century understanding of a fact, either do not understand this change or else deliberately reject it.

In historical research today this marks a divide. Ancient history until recently was firmly categorized as Indology, where the collection of information was the primary concern of some, with less interest in the interpretation of the information. This in part accounts for the widespread support of the colonial views of the Indian past. But in the mid-twentieth century there was a gradual shift towards the social sciences that were appearing on the Indian intellectual scene. Most historians now regard history as a part of the social sciences, and those that continue with the earlier understanding of the discipline maintain a distance. History as a social science goes beyond the collection of information to analysing the information by asking many new but pertinent questions, and insisting on deriving the ensuing causal connections from a framework of logic and rationality—insofar as it is possible, given the evidence available. And also the fact that the social sciences are not dealing with inert matter, but with humans, and with societies that were once living and those that are alive today.

Disagreements among historians are either over the nature of the historical fact or the reliability of the evidence, or the feasibility of the explanation proposed for the historical event. A popular view often maintains that there cannot be debates in history because the facts never change. People forget that in history, as in every other social science, there is a continuous reassessment of the validity of the evidence and the methods used to analyse it. The reading of the text or the explanation of the artefacts from an excavation carry within them the point of view of the historian or of the archaeologist. Artefacts don't speak, as is wrongly asserted by some archaeologists in India. They speak through the archaeologist who explains them and who may have his own axe to grind, whether Palaeolithic or contemporary. No historian is without his or her emphasis on particular explanations. We are all only too human and are the product of the ideas that make sense to us. There can also be a bias in the facts that are selected to make a point, and then there can be a bias in how the facts so selected are read. There is a priority in the selection of facts depending on what one is researching. At this level, the selection can be motivated to assist a particular reading. Generally this gets sorted out in the subsequent debate on the reading. This is why it is essential to publish new readings in professional journals where they can be professionally assessed, and not initially in newspapers as is becoming so common today.

A good historian recognizes his or her point of view and keeps it at a minimum or else makes it clear that a particular theory of explanation is being used to explain the event. The pitiable historian is the one who wears his bias on his sleeve, but insists nevertheless that he is without any bias. In the course of debating explanations, historicity becomes crucial.

RJ: But we have a process in the work of a historian, which is the historicization of man's experience. Do you consider this historicity as a multiplicity, or is it just one dimensional?

RT: It depends on what you mean by 'historicity'. If you mean it in its simplest sense, and you're referring to something that actually happened, then you're referring to an incident, or a single item. But if you argue that historicity requires explaining the reasons why something happened, then it's multiple.

NB: Could we dwell a bit more on these two questions—what is a historical fact, and how do historians select? When Carr says there are facts of the past, and then there are historical facts, what he is suggesting is that from the mass of facts of the past only some facts can be counted as historically significant. The critical question seems to be: how does a fact acquire historical significance, and who defines that significance? Are there any universal or taken-for-granted criteria of such judgements? Colonial historians defined a set of facts as important—offering us narratives that legitimated and celebrated colonial rule. The nationalists saw other facts as historically more important, providing a critique of colonial rule by foregrounding an alternative set of facts. In questioning the nationalist celebration of the ancient past, you are also reinterpreting what is important in yet another way. In fact, the way you look at the past today seems to be different from the way you looked at the past 50 years earlier, and there are facts of the past which you integrate into your narrative now which you did not discover as important earlier. So in that sense, doesn't our notion of what is 'historically significant' inevitably change over time? Can we really see any 'fact' as intrinsically historically significant? Is it not true that as historians we make sense of the facts and imbue them with specific meaning ... and they appear as significant and meaningful within the particular narratives we construct?

RT: Yes, it's up to the historian in interpreting a particular body of evidence, to prioritize what she thinks is the most significant and what is less so, and while doing so to explain the basis of that prioritization. It cannot be arbitrary and determined only by the likes and dislikes of the historian. In that process lies the creation of the historical fact—in the sense that the historian is drawing attention to something that happened, which others didn't take seriously or were not aware of, and the historian points out why it is significant. The historian gives reasons for it being important. Yes, to that extent I would say that part of the historian's business is to draw out the importance of a fact and explain its historical significance.

Objectivity in the Work of a Historian

RJ: Do you see a relationship in history between objectivity and correctly analysing the facts? What does it mean when we praise a historian for being objective?

RT: What it means for me is someone who ... and this is complicated. It's someone who first of all gathers together all of the possible evidence on the subject, which has become a difficult task today as the evidence has become so broad-based. One is not just looking at a few texts, one is also looking at all kinds of other sources as well. These are the ideas and objects that provide a context to a person or an event. The historian then gathers together as much evidence as can be related to the subject of research, and checks the reliability of the evidence—in other words, explains why she thinks this is probably reliable evidence: this in itself is a major historical process not perhaps taken seriously enough by most historians. I'll never forget a discussion I had with Leslie Gunawardana, a much-respected scholar of the early history of Sri Lanka, who after raising some impressive questions about the subject we were discussing—the Ceylon Chronicles—suggested that I should perhaps be more suspicious of the texts! I learnt slowly over the years that no text can be taken at face value by the historian, not because texts are dishonest or any such thing, but because texts have a context and a purpose, and knowing the context is crucial to understanding what the text purports to be saying.

Subsequent to checking the reliability of the evidence comes the logically determined causal relationships between evidence and event, between one event and another event, and so on. Finally, the historian draws out an argument from the making of these causal relationships. If all these steps are gone through, then I would say the person has the making of an objective historian. Keeping in mind the fact, of course, that if some new evidence were to suddenly turn up somewhere, as can happen in archaeology or through the discovery of a new inscription or a new text, one may have to reconsider one's arguments and one's conclusions.

RJ: But there are many ways of looking at this evidence.

RT: There are indeed many ways of looking at evidence.

RJ: How should a historian read a historical source?

NB: Often the historian is not reading new sources, but is rereading old sources in a slightly different way. So how do we then define the objectivity of the historian?

RT: Well, if it's the same historian who is doing this, as I have done in my lifetime, in aspects of Mauryan history, I would say my more recent reading is a step more objective and more incisive than my earlier reading. Although there's no strikingly new evidence, the reading of evidence in a new way can sometimes be revelatory. That is, for example, what I have tried to do in my study of Somanatha as well. I consulted the evidence that was known as most of it is published. By juxtaposing and correlating it, which had not been done before as it came from a variety of sources, I was able to ask new questions, and thereby obtain different answers from what had been given previously.

NB: But then is it necessary to use the notion of objectivity? Could we not say that your reading has become more meaningful, more plausible, more complex, more persuasive? And, therefore, your narrative makes more sense than the earlier one … your way of looking has changed, your frame of reference has become somewhat different from what it was earlier….

RT: That is certainly so, yes. If using a new method clarifies the reading of an event.

NB: May be we need to use a notion of objectivity that is specific to each narrative. What I mean is there's no absolute, universal criterion of objectivity that can be applied to judge one reading against another. You were not necessarily less objective earlier. Within the terms of your frame at that time you were being 'objective'.

RT: No, there isn't an absolute criterion for objectivity, because objectivity can also depend on the kind of evidence you're handling, and that can change from one problem to another. So there is no absolute criterion for objectivity, but one is asking oneself, 'Given the problem, given the evidence, given my analysis, am I being objective?' And to that extent I think although it's an old-fashioned word or even concept, I would still use it.

In earlier thinking, it was common to compare the historian to a judge who is neutral and claims his conclusion is without bias. This comparison was frequently made in the early twentieth century. Today it is not so much neutrality that is at a premium, but the understanding the historian has of the problem being researched, and ways of testing the validity of the explanations provided. History cannot provide a scientific proof of the past and the historian depends on understanding and explaining the past. In this process the present inevitably influences the past and one is always asking how this can be scaled down. Should it be clearly stated that the question put to the past emerges from a situation in the present? This connection is written into the fact that one is exploring the past from a point in the present. Objectivity is bound to be affected to a lesser or greater degree by this. There is, however, a need to separate, to the extent possible, what is presented as the past from its relevance to the present. However, some historians have argued that really great history is written when the historian has an insight into the problems of the present. It gives a different kind of edge to the investigation. This view remains a matter of debate among historians. There is also the view that some theories of explanation are in themselves objective as they are drawn from what are thought to be the laws of human activity.

NB: The thing is, the idea of objectivity is debated everywhere—but in India the question seems to acquire a political significance because of the kinds of histories we encounter. Perhaps we could have a negative definition of objectivity. That is, it could refer to a mode of writing history that does not knowingly repress evidence, takes into account complicated and contradictory evidence, and does not deliberately falsify. We have to be sceptical of the truth-claims of historians who do not have any commitment to the evidentiary protocols of writing history, even though we have to unpack the politics of these repressions. But ultimately the critical question is: how are we reading sources; what are the counter-readings; and what is the politics (politics in the widest sense of the term) of these readings.

RT: Objectivity is also—today in India particularly—problematic because the political pressures not to be objective are so strong. There are the demands of a society that has its own popular version of what history should be: people get very upset if you say, 'Sorry, but that is not an objective reading'. So there is the historian's objectivity, but it is within a context of a certain negativism that comes from the political context in which one is trying to be historically objective. Where historians are blatantly legitimizing an ideology, objectivity is claimed by saying that previous historical explanations are all biased and what is now being presented is correct even if the evidence to support it is non-existent or dubious. The concern is actually not with being objective, but with reordering the past to support a particular kind of present.

Another aspect of this is the link to historiography. The ideology of the historian may be clear and determined or else it may be dormant and not evident even to the historian. There are multiple influences on one's mind, some of which are clear, but others are imbibed almost without knowing they are present. It helps to know the intellectual ambience (or even the lack of it), or the historical training within which the historian is writing. Is the historian aware of this?

The Sources in History

RJ: With regard to the historical sources, I am tempted to ask you a question which you actually suggest in your own work, which is: should the historian ask whether the source is theoretical or not? And secondly, to ask whether the source is related to a certain social group or not?

RT: Oh yes, I think the analysis of the source … is a primary step in the evaluation of the source. You do have to ask, 'Where is this source coming from?' My quick rule to start the process is to ask, 'Who is the author? What is his social background? What is the agenda of the text? What is the purpose? What is it trying to do? Which are the social groups it is addressing? Which are the social interests it is propagating or negating? And how was it received at the time when it was written?' For my kind of history, these are crucial questions, because one has first to acquaint oneself with a text that was written centuries ago. Not all these questions will get detailed answers, but one has to try and ferret out the information. I think the evaluation of the source is part of the process of regarding it as reliable, either to a large extent or to a limited extent, depending on the way in which I have analysed the purpose and function of the source.

NB: Don't we then need to reframe the idea of reliability? Can we any longer say that deciding on the criterion of reliability is the most important thing? It is true historians need to distinguish between 'fictitious sources' and those that are genuine traces from the past. But beyond this, what could 'reliable' really mean? All sources are shaped by the contexts of their origin. The questions you just now specified tell us about the nature of the source/text: who produces it, when and why it is produced. They tell us about what the text can reveal, how it can be interpreted, what conclusions are possible. If that is so, then unpacking that source becomes a critical part of the historian's job. Isn't the question then not whether the text in an absolute sense is reliable or unreliable, but how the text can be meaningfully interpreted and used by a historian, given the fact that all texts and sources have a politics of their own?

RT: Yes, but I'm using....

NB: It's not reliable in any absolute sense....

RT: No, I'm not using 'reliable' in any absolute sense. I think it's in the nature of historical analysis that you have to be careful in using absolutes. You have to always see it 'up to a point' and be clear about where the point is. It's a case of, 'It's more reliable than "X", which has more fantasy'. You know, it's that kind of difference. As a historian one is contesting the projection of a supposed 'history' at the political–popular level that is mostly fantasy.

NB: I'm persisting with this question for an obvious reason. I think as historians our language is too often embedded within positivist thinking, though we have been struggling against that tradition for so long. Within the tradition of positivist history, the question is all too often posed in terms of reliable and non-reliable sources, the absence or the presence of sources. It is as if the mastery over the past would come from the discovery of more and more reliable sources. It is as if truth is embedded within a reliable source. Can we pose the issue in that form today? Is the critical issue that of reliability? Or is it a question of critical reading? And I think in your own writing, especially in the books published in the last twenty years, you are continuously unpacking sources to....

RT: It is unpacking, yes. But why are you unpacking a source? You're unpacking a source to find out, 'Can I use it?' And if I can use it, then I'm conceding it is up to a point reliable.

Is History a Single Voice?

RJ: There are two points here. One is, there is always a danger in the work of a historian that history becomes a narrative of a single voice. The second, there is always the work of selection in regard to the sources. Now, on what basis is the selection done?

RT: First of all, yes, history has been, very often, a single voice. What I have been trying to do, for example, in my work, and more so in my more recent work, are two things. One is to bring in other voices, wherever they're saying something about the subject I'm working on, as I've tried to do in my study of Somanatha. There are Persian accounts, there are a range of Sanskrit inscriptions, there are Jaina and other chronicles in Sanskrit, and there are narratives in folk literature. The reliability of each has to be ascertained in different ways.

The other way of doing this is to ask that if a narrative is repeatedly retold in different forms with some embellishments right through the centuries, then whose are the many voices that are recreating that narrative and why? Okay? This is what I was trying to do on two different occasions. One was to take the narrative of the *Rama katha*, the story of Rama, and see how it is treated in Buddhist, Jaina, and Brahmanical traditions. As I suspected, the treatment is widely different. In such a situation the historian has also to explain why it is different. I used the same technique with my book on Shakuntala. We know the story is fiction, but its varying treatment provides us with some perspectives on the historical context of the different times and the different ways in which it was recreated. The story occurs initially in the *Mahabharata*, is later converted into a drama by Kalidasa, and still later into plays in Braj-bhasha for the court in Avadha, and in other Indian languages, and even later in many translations into European and modern Indian languages, and in the many commentaries on the story by European and Indian critics, from William Jones to Rabindranath Tagore. So, yes, history cannot be the history from a single voice. There are other voices, and they have to be heard.

The multiplicity of voices is reflected even more emphatically in the work that I have been beavering on all my life and which was finally published as a rather stout volume entitled *The Past Before Us*. The essays in the book reflect my understanding of how various groups of people or single authors interpreted the early Indian past. It ranges from Brahmanical authors to Sanskrit litterateurs, to Buddhist and Jaina monks, all writing about their perception of the past. The range is from Vedic times to the early second millennium AD. It is not necessarily the identical past of a single society, or region or period of rule, but each chapter tries to suggest how a particular author, representing a particular social perspective, wrote about the past, and where possible I refer to other views of the same past from other voices. Writing this book probably gave me far more insight into the early Indian past than any of the other studies I have done.

RJ: What about the selection of the sources?

RT: The selection of the sources is partly dependent on the initial analysis that historians always make for each source, and the degree to which what may be called 'reliability', can be observed for each. If I say a particular source seems more reliable and list the reasons why I think so, then I would be giving priority to that one. But that doesn't stop me from doubting whether the reliability is punctured. But in order to defend my selection, I have to explain why I'm giving priority to that source.

NB: How would you react to a statement which says that, 'Actually, it's your framework of looking at history which defines which sources you select and what the source reveals. Because it's that frame, in a certain sense, which allows us to pose certain questions, defines our historical gaze, and the nature of the dialogue we have with the sources. A source as we know does not speak on its own. New questions and sensitivity to new issues allow us to read the same source in new ways. Now, in your own practice as a historian, the way you went back to the past—through your sources—in the 1950s and the 1960s, is different from the way you read those texts now. From the 1990s you are subjecting texts to a kind of critical reading and focusing on issues which you could not have done in the 1960s. So would you not say that the selection of sources and the evidence that a source offers is intimately connected to the frame through which we look at the sources?

RT: The initial selection, yes. Initially, one has to begin with a framework. What in the old days of historical method classes we used to call 'a hypothesis'. What is your hypothesis is the question you started with? In the course of doing your analysis, both of the source and the subject you're researching, you may find other aspects, and you may have to alter your initial framework. Where the analysis of a source is extensive, there the possibility of the framework having to be altered becomes part of the historical exercise. In other words, if I start off with a particular framework, obviously that is going to condition the kinds of sources I will pick up. But if I find, in the course of doing the research, that there are other aspects that have got left out, and these other aspects need investigation, and then I start investigating them and find them important, then obviously my initial framework will have to be modified or changed. I may even treat it as unimportant or marginal to my analysis, and someone else may prove that this was a lacuna and I might then have to modify my study. Assessing the importance of particular sources is essential to the process.

Is Historical Narrative a Rational System?

RJ: When we talk about the historical narrative in your work, are we talking about a rational system? Or are we talking about drawing historiography from its intimate connections with literary imagination?

RT: No, I think we're talking primarily about a rational system and we may then consider the literary imagination, although often the two may even be simultaneous. I mean, it would be nice to have it linked to a literary imagination, but then that might take me far away from what I'm talking about in terms of historiography. Nevertheless good history can be written using a literary imagination as well. But that's the kind of thing for which you really have to have an almost instinctive understanding of what you're researching. That isn't open to all historians.

NB: Suppose one was to say the narrative of the nationalist movement—to give an example from modern India—can be written as a heroic narrative. When you read it, you can get a story of all the successes and triumphs. But it has also been written as a tragic narrative of betrayals, compromises, failures, unfulfilled promises. And then we have some historians deploying the ironic mode to write that history. That is, you are adopting a narrative strategy where you're both appreciating—but not celebrating and glorifying—and defining a critical distance from what you are describing, marking a kind of ironic distance from it. So the literary, and what you say is the 'rational', fuse together in the mode of narration you choose.

RT: Yes, but I think there's a difference between using literary forms and using a literary imagination. And I think that what you're talking about is the form, using literary modes of the heroic or the tragic, and so on.

NB: That is perhaps one part of the question. The other one would be to see the validity of the standard opposition between the fictive and the 'real', history referring to the real and literature being 'fictive'. This binary often defines the historian's suspicion of literary imagination. Isn't that at one level problematic? In the sense, in going back to the past, in narrating history, we are telling a story and imagining it. It is true historians build their narrative through a dialogue with evidence, but imagination comes into play in the structuring of the narrative—the way events are sequenced, connections are made, the world of the past is constructed. Can we reconstruct and tell a historical story without the play of imagination? Now, the imaginative element is certainly constrained for the historian, it has to be defined through a dialogue with sources—the sources don't allow a free play of imagination in the strong sense. As historians we cannot say things for which we have no source. The past that leaves no trace is, in a sense, lost to us. But we inevitably narrate through the use of imagination. So the line of difference between the rational and the literary, or the fictive and the real, is hazy.

RT: It's blurred, but then I guess that's the difference between a rather predictable history and a slightly more imaginative history. The first tends to be narrow in its explanations and, therefore, possibly more limited, whereas the second can suggest more than one explanation that makes the argument more interesting. The latter may have a touch of imagination, but has to make the distinction between the two, often simply by the way in which it is written. Even in rational analyses, there are moments when what we often call a leap of the imagination takes one to a different level of explanation.

But I would like to clarify that a historical imagination is not just an ordinary exercise in imagination. R.G. Collingwood defined it with clarity. He stated that the historical reconstruction involved an element of imagination. He was not, however, suggesting it was simply an imagined past. It has to draw on the evidence that we use and the nature of the questions we put to the evidence. He spoke of the historical reconstruction of the past as an attempt at a kind of re-enactment of the past, which the historian does in the form of a historical narrative. Where there are gaps in the reconstruction, suggestions for filling these with a reconstruction might be feasible, provided they come from connecting the evidence through causal, logical links. But the exercise in historical imagination has finally to be submitted to an interrogation of the generalizations that emerge. This questioning is of the utmost importance.

NB: Once we recognize the play of imagination in historical construction, we can then go on to specify how literary and historical imagination differs.

Historians and Philosophy of History

RJ: Do you consider your historical work as a form of storytelling?

RT: Storytelling would make it fun, but mine has been described as dense history!

RJ: So on that level I want to ask you this question, since we didn't talk about your readings of Marxism. If you consider history to be a rational system, for you, what is the difference between a historical tradition of thought and a philosophy of history? Do you practice a philosophy of history in the Marxist sense of the term or do you situate yourself in a special historical tradition of thought?

RT: I'm basically practicing what I think is history in the way it is now generally defined—allowing, of course, for a margin of variation in methods. I deliberately use the phrase 'what I think', and not 'what is'. What I think is a legitimate understanding of the past, or at least a comprehensible one. What I think is really an attempt to understand the past. Now whether this particular understanding conforms to a philosophical tradition or not, I'm not very clear on that. I mean I do know that there are certain philosophical traditions that I have thought about, that have entered my thinking through various indirect readings, more than anything else. But I have generally not consciously read the philosophy of history in terms of, 'I'm trying to understand philosophical systems and see how I can apply them'. No. Whatever philosophy of history comes into my writing is a sort of trickle-down effect from reading X, Y, and Z. If someone says to me, 'All right, now what is your ideological position', I would say, 'I really don't know whether I can put a single label on it'.

RJ: I wasn't referring necessarily to your readings, but to a philosophy of history in your historical narrative.

RT: Possibly, yes.

RJ: Many of the Marxist historians with whom you worked were influenced by the tradition of philosophy of history from Hegel, Marx, and many Marxists.

RT: I don't think intellectual influences come in a block that sits inside one's head and determines one's thinking. I haven't worked with the Marxists I spoke of, I have had conversations with them and through the give and take of dialogue, some ideas took root. Where and how does one trace the genesis of an idea? Yes, one idea may have come from reading a book. The idea of gift exchange came to me from reading Marcel Mauss, but nevertheless the idea was not enough as I had to develop it by using the *dana-stuti* hymns of the *Rig Veda* and passages from the *Mahabharata*. In some cases one remembers a striking conversation that may have revealed the universe, so to speak! It would be difficult for me to pinpoint which idea came from a conversation with the Marxist D.D. Kosambi and which from the more Weberian Moses Finley—except in a general way, and so general that it may perhaps have changed in the course of remembering.

I have read portions of Hegel and of Marx. What I read were the works that practically everybody reads, Marxists and non-Marxists alike. One starts with Emile Burns, and such like, and the original writings, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, *The Communist Manifesto*, Feuerbach, and that kind of thing. I have only dipped into parts of *Capital* when tracking a reference that I thought might be of interest.

NB: Philosophy ... most philosophies of history are really written by philosophers. Very few historians write philosophies of history. When historians are reading different traditions of theoretical writing, they are appropriating these diverse traditions in their own way, reworking these traditions in the process. And they devise their own historical approach in the act of doing history, rethinking their conceptual premises through the dialogue with the archive, on the one hand, and new theoretical traditions, on the other.

If we look at your writings from the 1960s, we can see how this interaction with different traditions structured your frame of thinking. In the 1960s, you were influenced by certain forms of Marxism, which was inflected by your reading of cultural anthropology. By the 1970s, we can see you engage with the insights of French Marxist anthropology, and by the 1980s and 1990s, you were opening up to certain forms of cultural and critical theory. We can see this later influence in your books—*Somanatha*, *Shakuntala*, in your recent magnum opus *The Past Before Us*. You may be in many ways uncomfortable with this recent inheritance—that is, the textual and the critical turn—but your work reflects it.

RT: Well, that is it. One begins by reading the basic texts of Marx or Weber, for example. And then one starts reading others who were writing on these texts and their ideas, and one uses them in different ways. And sometimes that reading becomes much more ... how should I put it? It really becomes much more pertinent to the questions that one is asking of one's data, than going back to the original philosophical texts of Marx or anyone else. And that is where one is uncertain whether one is using Marx, using a Marxist method, using methods that are partially derived from Marxism and derived from other thinkers....

But let me not suggest that a historian has to read in a manner that is eclectic or dilettante. I was in a sense more interested in the way in which theories of explanation came to be used in times subsequent to when they were first propounded. I read Weber on Indian religion and disagreed with his ideas, a disagreement that I wrote up as a paper that was widely distributed, and I felt at that time—thirty years ago or more—that perhaps Weber's ideas had obstructed some kinds of thinking on Indian religion where the Weberian explanation was being used. But that may have had to do with the direction such readings took. A recent rereading of Weber on Indian religion reinforced my earlier critique, although some of his general theories suggest new perspectives. I was equally intrigued by the neo-Marxism of the French social scientists and how they used it in cultural studies. And yes, some of this reading does hover when I write on similar aspects of Indian society.

NB: Did you not always have a conflicted relationship with Marxism? The Marxism of the 1950s and the 1960s in India was very often deeply reductive, even though historians had begun to struggle against this heritage. Your writings of that period don't show that form of reductionism.

There are many things you explore from the 1960s that Marxists of that time would not focus on. You study specific cultural worlds, particular stereotypes.... I'm thinking of your writings on the barbarian, or the concept of *dana* (gift or offering), for instance. At one level you are contextualizing what you explore—and your desire to contextualize comes from the tradition of materialism—but at another level, you focus on the ritual, perceptual, and cultural dimensions in ways that shows your sensitivity to anthropological literature of the time. Did this create a tension within you, the fear of not being understood by your Marxist peers, of your arguments being disapproved?

RT: Perhaps the passing discomfort was not just mine! If I may put it a little immodestly, it may also have been that of those of my peers who were Marxists and who would have liked me to be more reductionist. I appreciated the critique of those who knew what is meant by a Marxist history and who also had a knowledge of Indian history. Among such people I am reminded here of the critique of my work by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, who was a rare person—a politician who read extensively and thought about what he had read and met the criteria I have just stated. He did not always endorse my historical interpretations and was critical of some whilst being appreciative of others. This kind of thoughtful reaction, where he pointed out the limitations of what I was saying from a Marxist perspective, required me to further clarify some of my arguments. This I did, not to make them conform to his critique, but to clarify my own ideas and make them more accessible.

I am aware of the assessment of my history made by Marxist historians who maintain that my history is not Marxist, but nevertheless it is a history based on rational argument and can be thought of as a scientific approach to history. Fair enough. There are plenty of others who have no real understanding of what the label 'Marxist' means, but rush to use it about me as a form of condemning what I am saying, a more polite form than the rank abuse that comes from some Hindutva-*vadin*s. The point I am trying to make is that it is not just a question of whether I am a Marxist or not. Instant labels come from those who know little or nothing about the meaning of the labels. There is no one fixed position that determines whether a person is a leftist or a rightist. There are degrees of nearness or distancing that might influence what one is saying. In making a critique, the intelligent critic has to be sensitive to these degrees, otherwise the critique has no value and is merely a label or a term of abuse.

What Is Oral History?

RJ: Your historical methodology is certainly not an ideological one, but there is an element of historical consciousness in your work which is important. I think this question by itself is a question of the philosophy of history, because we're talking about not just writing the events or the facts, but what kind of awareness it brings us. How do you distinguish between oral history and written history on that level? Is there a distinction in your work between the two?

RT: I really haven't explored oral history to any great extent partly because when I began writing history there was little attention given to oral sources. This was despite the fact that some innovative history was beginning to be written on the basis of oral interviews, such as the books of my friend Studs Terkel's *Division Street America* published in 1967, and *Hard Times: The Oral History of the Great Depression*, in 1970, that captured American views and moods related to their world and its events. In those days, oral sources were generally seen as too problematic, prone to be unreliable, and the degree of reliability they may have had was never thought to be sufficient in comparison with written texts. The bias against oral sources slowly and gradually declined. This happened in part through reconstructing African history, using Bantu oral tradition in particular, especially in the attempt to discover a historical narrative, from oral sources. They were then seriously examined and gradually a method of analysis was worked out by which they could be used as evidence. The techniques of examining oral history have now become much more sophisticated.

What I was interested to read and possibly use was the work on oral formulaic compositions and studies on epics as an oral form, with reference to the Serbian, Central Asian, and Homeric epics by scholars such as Milman Parry and Albert Lord, in *The Singer of Tales*, who have discussed both descriptive qualifiers and themes as characteristic of epic forms. That made me aware of the possibilities of examining even the epics of past times from the perspective of the oral tradition. This can provide some historical information on the relationship between forms of compositions and the kind of society they refer to and are supported by. With the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, for instance, we know that these epics as we have them today, grew out of an oral tradition, since they display some features of continuity from this tradition, as, for example, formulaic phrases or even some of the storyline.

Attempts have been made to study popular medieval epics and compare them with the earlier Sanskrit ones, such as the work on the *Alha kand* and the Pabuji epic from Rajasthan, or the studies of Alf Hiltebeitel that examined popular versions of the older epics, how they vary, and the way in which the *Mahabharata* is represented among a variety of social groups. The critical editions of the two Sanskrit epics, one from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) in Pune and the other from the Oriental Institute in Baroda, have been an enormous help in the analysis of the texts. But an immersion in the methodology of how one examines an oral tradition would be an additional dimension. Hopefully, some younger historians will do that, because I think it would be fascinating if someone properly trained in the methodology could look at the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, or even the Buddhist *Jataka* stories, as part of an original oral tradition, and start examining them from that point of view. I did on occasion discuss this aspect of the epics with Professor R.N. Dandekar at the BORI, but somehow neither of us took it further.

I think it is particularly significant for Indian cultural history as there is an enormously rich data in the oral tradition. The two forms have to be juxtaposed and viewed partly as a reflection of each other and partly as depicting diverse societies. These could provide many insights. The social and cultural history of medieval India, for instance, as drawn from the oral tradition—and even that which has since been recorded—would present a challenge to the picture we have constructed from texts associated with royal courts alone. Since we do not have the original oral traditions from earlier times, we can still do a study of the oral tradition from later periods, because the patterns that emerge from such studies need not be applied literally, but could well provide clues to illumine the earlier compositions.

NB: Do you think you are not really deploying the methods of the oral historian at all? As you say, oral history has developed a lot in the last thirty or forty years. We can no longer dismiss oral sources as less reliable and less authentic than written sources. We can no longer see the written as intrinsically more trustworthy. The kind of questions the oral historians are asking are not so different from the question you ask of your textual material. In unpacking the oral source they ask: Who produced the source? What is the mode of transmission? What could have affected that mode? When did the transmission from the oral to the written take place? Who recorded it? How was it recorded? What is the relationship between the oral and the written? Now, that's what you are doing in any case, in a certain sense, when you look at the texts of your oral tradition.

RT: No, I don't think I would say I'm not deploying the methods, as I have now and again taken a cue from some of them. What I mean is that the stricter controls of method that oral history now requires are what I am not fully aware of. And I think the problems really come with the forms of transmission, and the formulaic, which are very important to the oral tradition, and one has to learn to recognize them. There are obvious phrases such as, 'Tiger among men' or 'Bull of the Bharatas', that occur frequently and have a more than literal significance. Or there are situations that recur and the recurrence gives one a clue to the kind of society that is being projected. Or the narratives depict a particular kind of society. I have used a few of such observations to argue that the *Mahabharata* is the epic of clan societies whereas the *Ramayana* is a conflict between clan societies and an emergent kingdom. But this is just a preliminary view. Even this suggestion had to be backed up by far more data, as, for instance, on patterns of genealogies and the organization of land and labour. And that's what I meant when I said it would be good if somebody who was trained in the methodologies of investigating the oral tradition could examine these texts to provide an additional perspective.

What Is Historicity?

RJ: I would like to go back to the idea of forms of transmission because the question I have in my mind is, what is the purpose of having a narrative? Or, why society records an event, or doesn't record an event. And this is where your work becomes very significant. I remember in your last book actually, *The Past Before Us*, you reconfim your position as a historian by saying it's not your intention to prove the historical authenticity of what is being narrated about the past because you are mostly concerned by the perception of historical consciousness in the text.

RT: What I was trying to suggest was that the question of historicity hinges on what we were talking about earlier: that you may regard a certain interpretation as definitive and final, and then some new perspective is introduced and you realize it isn't a definitive interpretation, that there are other ways of looking at it. So what do we mean by historicity?

This question figures more than once in my book, *The Past Before Us*. It is an attempt to suggest how a society from the past looked at its earlier past. It is not intended to be a recounting of 'authentic histories' of early India, written in earlier times, and representing an indigenous view of Indian history different from our contemporary histories of early India. My starting point was that all societies have a sense of the past, conditioned to some degree by what might be called a historical consciousness. The past is then ordered in a way that is comprehensible to the society. So we cannot say that a particular society lacked a sense of history. We can say that what various cultures, such as the Indian, saw as their history varied over time and varied in perspective in accordance with their world view. They were not concerned with writing a history of the past as we would do now, but with representing the past as they saw it and giving it priorities that they felt were legitimate. In trying to understand this we today have to explain why they saw the past as they did and why they wrote about it in diverse genres. Why did this representation change in accordance with the nature of the society and its ideological orientation.

Clan societies visualized the past differently from caste societies. Brahmanical versions of the past were different from Buddhist and Jaina versions. I have tried to relate these differences to the form, structure, and contents of the text, that encapsulate the representations. I have looked at texts where these latter were more embedded such as the epics and the *Purana*s, as well as the later texts where they were more evident and externalized, such as historical biographies, royal inscriptions, and chronicles of kingdoms. If one tries to analyse these changing forms, the analysis has also to be not just a test of historicity as we have thought so far, but it has to be an understanding of their use of historiographical perspective as well.

The other questions are 'Why is one writing a narration of the past?' or 'Why were they, in the earlier periods, thinking of the past?' or 'Why at various points in time do people write their views of the past?'. These were the questions that interested me when I was writing *The Past Before Us*. I think there has to be a multiple understanding of the subject, namely, who is writing, what are they writing, and what was the purpose of the writing? The simplest reason that is always given, and is also a reason that I've given in my book, is to legitimize the present. It is, of course, not the only reason. But we continue to use it even now. Even today, in the twenty-first century, we're looking at the past to legitimize some of what we're doing now. Sometimes we do this crudely, and sometimes in subtle forms. But there is a connection. I remember an argument with my friend Susan Reynolds on E.H. Carr's statement that history is a dialogue between the past and the present. She argued, and pertinently so, that it is not a dialogue between the past and the present, it's a dialogue between the present and what the present assumes that the past is saying. There's a difference. Now, this dialogue I think has gone on through the centuries. There has always been a present looking at the past, but looking at it from the perspective of the present, and using what it can from the past in order to legitimize itself. I think this has been something that overlays what we call historical narrative from the very beginning.

NB: I entirely agree with you at one level. But when we say that a historian is looking at the past, and interpreting the facts of the past from his standpoint of the present, we are emphasizing only the significance of the present in interpreting and selecting. But if we only argue that, we get into a problem. The location in the present is undoubtedly critical in defining our reading of the past, but the past also makes demands on us. While it opens up the space for interpretation, it also defines the limits of that space.... Very often it resists certain kinds of reinterpretation. As you were saying, the sources often persuade us to see something else. In a sense they, too, speak to us. There is almost a voice which says, 'Look at this', and this requires you to think about that. That often persuades us to reorient our gaze. It disturbs the frame through which we look at sources. So in that sense the confrontation with sources becomes ... at a certain level, an engaged dialogue, a two-way process.

RT: Yes, but the dialogue is largely conditioned by the present either speaking for the past or perhaps suggesting that the past and the present are in dialogue, but keeping the perspective of the present in view.

NB: True, but the past, as you said earlier, is forcing you to see something ... the evidence is persuading you to observe something. So, you reorient your frame very often because the evidence....

RT: Yes, the evidence does force you to reorient your frame.

NB: So it is a complicated dialogue, where you are seemingly in control in a certain sense, but your control gets frequently disturbed by the evidence.

RJ: Maybe I can add a point to what you're saying, because I remember in *The Past and Prejudice* you say more than being a dialogue, it's a kind of a dialectic. I remember you use the words 'a two-way process'. A two-way process when the needs of the present take you to read, in a certain manner, the past, and when you have the image of the past which is in some way thought to be imposed upon the present. So it's not necessarily a dialogue, it's kind of a dialectic.

RT: How does the past impose its image on the present? You have to read that image and say, 'This is the image of the past that is being imposed by....'

RJ: But is it because you want to be in dialogue with the past?

RT: The historian alone won't be in dialogue. But the present will be the general present that wishes to use the past as a way of strengthening or understanding a particular view of the present.

NB: Is 'use' the right word?

RJ: So when you want to use a dimension you're not necessarily in dialogue with that dimension because you don't feel yourself on an equal level. Is there an element of domination of the past by the present?

RT: There is an element of the domination of the present on the past. That is at one level linked to historiography. It's the past being viewed through the eyes of the present. And what the historian has to do is to ask, 'Are you sure the past really was like that or are you seeing it like that, because of the other reasons generally emanating from the present?'

Which Authority Features in Historical Research?

RJ: Now, I am going to invite you to another dimension which is the dimension of authority. In his essay 'Ancient History and the Antiquarians', Momigliano distinguishes between what he calls the 'original authority' and the 'derivative authority' in historical research. How can we distinguish between what is a derivative authority and what is an original authority? When we talk about the derivative authority in historical research, are we talking about materials and archives? What kind of a past are we relating with?

RT: We try to consult original authority, except where it's quite obviously derivative. But, for example, if you're looking at the kind of material that some of us have to look at—let's say inscriptions, where the king issues an inscription, and that has a fair amount of information about the king, the dynasty, the religious sectarian beliefs, the reason why the inscription was issued, who composed it, who engraved it, its date, and so on. This is an articulation of a person in authority who is recording an act of authority. So we take that as an expression of an original authority, and the record is legitimizing that original authority. The record says that this actually did happen, and this person actually did do what he is said to have done. So the source here becomes the legitimizer of the original authority.

RJ: Let us compare, for example, the Cyrus Cylinder as a source of Persian nationalism, compared with the event of Karbala for the Shi'ites. Which one has more authority as a historical document or a historical event? Or do they both have authorities in different senses?

RT: They both have their authorities in different senses as they are addressing different groups at different times. Karbala legitimizes a religious event and a religious group. The Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylindrical tablet referring to the activities of Cyrus in the mid-first millennium AD, legitimizes Cyrus, the Achaemenid king, at the time when he ruled, and becomes a source of authority as well for Persian nationalism many centuries later. So you have to ask the next question, which is: whose history are you writing as a historian? Are you writing the history of the Persians, in which case you give a central position to the Cyrus Cylinder? Or are you writing a history of Islam, in which case you give a central position to Karbala? The historical evaluation of comparing two disparate events depends very much on the way the historians are looking at events and the society for whom the history is being written.

NB: What you are suggesting is that the significance any event has for a society, for a social group or community, is something that is constituted over time by history. There is nothing intrinsic in an event that accounts for its significance. And events usually have no universal significance. Different social groups, in different periods, may experience the same event in different ways, read their experience diversely, and imbue the events with particular meaning. One could say, there is always a dialectic between *sedimentation* and *innovation*, between meanings that are sedimented over time and new meanings that are inscribed on to things. So....

RT: I think it also depends on the record you're referring to. The Cyrus Cylinder is a document that was issued in the sixth century BC by an Iranian ruler of great importance who proclaims that he is the king, lists the lands he has conquered, and states the ethic he believes in and wishes to propagate. So when he issues a statement such as this, because he's a person of authority and it has relevance to a past event or to an event of the present, it immediately has significance. It echoes the earlier Assyrian ideology. It need not have had the same significance for the history of its time, but if it did then various groups may have associated themselves with it even after a long period of being away from it. From this perspective it is a remarkable object. As it has been said in the Jewish tradition, Cyrus emerges as a messiah of the Jewish God and his cylinder encapsulates the message. Many centuries later, when this small object was briefly placed in a museum in Bombay as part of a visiting exhibition, the Parsis in India appreciated it with a difference. They could actually perceive it, having been brought up on its significance as a segment of their historical past. The significance will vary, but its having or not having significance depends on the purpose for which it is used. It can have immediate significance for one group of people, and then it can continue to have significance over history for a larger group of people, or a different group of people, or even more intensive significance for yet another group of people.

NB: Perhaps one can logically make another level of distinction between different kinds of significance or authority. First, there is the *intended significance*, that is, the significance that the author of a statement intended to inscribe in what he pronounced—in a text, an inscription, a speech, or a proclamation. Second, there is the *historically re-constituted significance*—it is the meaning attached to the statement over time, and this is defined by the way proclamations are received, read, and their meaning is reworked by social groups, often in radically different ways. As historians we will then have to see both the *intended significance* as well the *historically reconstituted significance*.

RT: Yes. If I take an example from my writing what comes to mind is the collection of the Ashokan edicts.

NB: I was just thinking of your Ashokan edicts.

RT: Ashoka, the Mauryan king, issued them at a time when they had a tremendous significance for him. That's quite clear from the way he articulates his views and hopes to communicate them to people who would hear them read or read them. The king after all is issuing an edict, so people have to know what he's saying. Subsequent to his reign, their significance seems to die down as few refer to them, and after a while the script can't be read. He is remembered in some Buddhist texts, but for his patronage to Buddhism and not for his edicts. There's a famous pillar now in Allahabad fort, brought here subsequently from its original location. In addition to the edicts of Ashoka, it carries an inscription of Samudragupta of the Gupta dynasty written half a millennium later. And then there is an inscription of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, not to mention the graffiti of lesser rulers. Those that came after Ashoka, seem not to have known what was written on the pillar, but there was a sense in which this object had some historical significance for them, so they also inscribed their identity on it. Still later this sense is exonerated when the inscriptions are deciphered. We now know of the great king who ruled and his ideas. These appealed to the nationalists and he became iconic. His symbol becomes the symbol on the national flag. His ideas become part of the current debate on the values that inspire the republic of India, such as his emphasis on honouring the views of all sects. So what the icon represents goes from significance to insignificance to even greater significance; the association moves historically.

NB: What you are really showing is how the significance of artefact and objects also has a history. An object is intended to have a particular significance, but people may not see any significance, or inscribe it with a different significance as did Samudragupta and Jahangir in the case of the Ashokan pillar. Then nationalists re-symbolized the pillar, erasing the marks (not literally) of later rulers, to create an artefact of national importance, iconizing Ashoka. So what is important is to see how the edicts were initially projected, and subsequently received and resignified ... and how, many centuries later, they were appropriated and became objects of nationalist memorialization, linked to the politics of the nationalist present. If historians do not see this history of signification, then one might assume that the edicts always had the same significance through history.

RT: All the way through?

NB: All the way through.

RT: No, it's quite....

NB: Then we would be erasing the history of signification, imbuing the pillar with an intrinsic significance, without looking at how that the pillar has been imbued with different significance over time. With the inscription of new meanings, its social and political function, too, changes over time.

RT: If you assume that the significance is unbroken from the beginning, then this is not correct. The pattern is not always the same. Sometimes this happens and in other instances the significance just dies down.

History and the Greeks

RJ: This significance, is it also related to the authority of historical traditions? You say the Greek and Roman historical traditions had this authority up to the seventeenth century. They were very dominant as a school of thought. And this is how the idea of civilization became the theme of history. So is it the authority of the historical traditions which gives significance to the history of mankind?

RT: Yes, it's the authority of the tradition that is making it significant or not, and is reviving its significance. It's the same with Greece and Rome in Europe, when the Greek texts practically ceased to be read. Then they were read by the Arabs who appropriated Aristotle and Socrates and such like. When the Greek cities were attacked, Greek learning fled to Europe where it was revived. There is a further study of the significance of Greek texts in the seventeenth century when the theory of civilizations is worked out.

RJ: But it actually somehow overshadowed the history of ancient India, for example....

RT: Yes. It overshadowed virtually all else since much of the rest of the world was relatively unknown. But the real overshadowing came with colonial thinking. If we had not had colonial rulers, the notion of the Greek miracle in civilizational terms would not have entered our history books as it did in my childhood.

RJ: Do you think there is still a dominant intellectual idea among today's historians that we have inherited history from the Greeks?

RT: I think it depends on the historians you're talking about. The ones who haven't thought in a fully emancipated manner about the discipline of history would say yes. Herodotus is often described as the father of history, and I remember the joke about him at a seminar in Oxford where he was described by some as more likely the father of gossip than of history. But at the popular level it is still said that he was the original historian although scholars hold a different view. Now, even for Europe, the concept of history was not uniform from beginning to end. I have argued in my book that the Greeks and the Romans had one idea of history; medieval Europe had an entirely different idea. It was the Church, it was Christ, it was God's will. This was not in conformity with the Greco-Roman idea of history. And then there was the Renaissance followed by the Enlightenment that introduced a new idea with its emphasis on the rational explanation of events. Thus, there were three distinct and successive theoretical patterns to explain history. Can one, therefore, speak of the explanation of historical events in the European tradition as a continuity of the same theories?

RJ: But Momigliano says we should not use the concept of inheritance for Greek history.

RT: He's right in as much as the concept of inheritance in this context is a return, it's a deliberate picking up by scholars, of a tradition they feel is at the root of European culture. Athenian democracy being the root of modern democracy is now regarded as dubious if not unviable as a generalization. The anomaly is that of the ratio of free citizens to slaves. Only a small proportion of the population were free citizens. The majority were, therefore, not represented. Can this be called a democratic system?

NB: Shouldn't the idea of 'inheritance' and 'influence' be problematized? There is never a simple unfolding of inheritance, and no influence works inexorably. A lot would depend on how and why a society or a social group, located in the present, discovers a specific past as significant, and defines a particular relationship with that past. Inheritance is constituted by societies located in the present—the past we trace our lineage back to is refigured in that act of the return.

But, having said that, do you really think that in Indian historiography there is a tracing of lineage back to Greece?

RT: For European historians a century ago writing about India, yes, they did try and trace influences and forms in the Indian past that were suggestive of Greek equivalents, back to Greece, back to the Hellenistic world. Some of these historians were influential, such as W.W. Tarn on the Greeks in India, and to a lesser extent Vincent Smith. Obviously, they were more comfortable dealing with familiar forms. Thus, Gandhara art of the north-western borderlands influenced by Hellenistic forms was, at one point, regarded as the highest achievement in Indian art, although later it was regarded as hybrid art. Not that I know what 'pure art' is, or can be, but still.... And it was largely in matters of art and architecture, art more than architecture even, that there was a tendency to say that the Indian forms were derivative, and were derived from Greco-Roman forms.

This was questioned as part of the nationalist interpretation of Indian art. That debate has now largely moved off the radar because historians are no longer too concerned with what features in art are directly derived from what source. It remains an interest and is sometimes important, but it is not an obsession as it once was. Certain elements can be common to particular social forms combined with access to the kinds of materials that are required for particular sculptures and art, and the emphasis is on connections rather than influences. Then there is also the question of what a form or symbol is intended to convey and if it always conveys the same meaning. Forms emerge from social and aesthetic conditions, from the ideology that encourages these forms—be they Buddhist or Hindu or whatever—and through influential iconographies and styles that are taken from place to place. The element of borrowing is accepted, but is treated as marginal. But at the same time much depends also on the region where an art form develops. In borderlands, for instance, such as the areas where Gandhara art prevailed, a mixing of forms and styles was expected as it was at the intersection of Asian trade—from China, Central Asia, West Asia, and the Mediterranean world. The debate of a century ago as to the derivation of Indian art forms is no longer a central question.

History and Epic

RJ: I would like for us to stay on this comparative analysis between the Greeks and the Indians. The Greeks had a long tradition of epic literature as you know, but they made a difference between history and epic. Do we encounter the same differentiation in the Indian historical tradition?

RT: One of the things that's always interested me is that when the two epics are described, there is a greater frequency in referring to the *Mahabharata* as *itihasa*. The word is used for past times and means 'thus indeed it was'. The *Ramayana*, however, is more frequently described as a *kavya*, a literary form, often poetry, that need not refer primarily to the past. It is often described as the *adi kavya*, the first *kavya*. There's little doubt that the *Ramayana* is a literary entity in spirit and form. The *Mahabharata* is far more of a stringing together or a boxing in of narratives, some of which unfold as beautiful poetry and some as rather dry narrative. Historically, I find it the more interesting text as it incorporates multiple societies registering much variation together with their idiosyncrasies. I feel this distinction is not a casual one. My reasons for saying this are rather complicated, but if you'd like it I will spell them out.

RJ: Please do so.

RT: The *Mahabharata* suggests a text that draws together the different clans of northern India, omitting the clans of the east. It includes the known clans, those that relate to each other in various ways, but this does not prevent them from going to war, the terminal war, the war that is typical of epic literature. Epics tend to end with a terminal war where most clans and heroes die, and the few that survive are left to carry on the tradition as best they can. The clan system in this case comes to an end through the devastation of war. It is significant that Krishna as a central figure pronounces *sarvam kshatram kshayam gatam*—the clans have been destroyed. He makes a very clear statement. And I think this is in fact epic material—this is what epics are about. Historically, it is curious that some *gana-rajya*s, clan societies, survive in this geographical area, and are referred to in the account of India by the Hellenist visitor to the Mauryas, Megasthenes, and in local inscriptions, but less frequently after the mid-first millennium AD. The confrontation is between clan societies or chiefships as some of us now prefer to call them, and the fast-emerging and spreading kingship. From the point of view of the bards of the clans and their heroes, the last throes of the Kurukshetra war were a disaster for the clans. The epics are in a sense registering this condition.

If the *Mahabharata* is depicting the end-of-clan society, the *Ramayana* is depicting another form of the destruction of clans with the triumph of kingship as a new sociopolitical form. The *Ramayana* highlights the kingdom of Kosala as an example of early kingdoms and the beginnings of kingship. The poem is, among other things, a eulogy to kingship. Every now and again, there is a slight hint that this is really not the way kingship works, it's the way the clan system used to work. But kingship remains pre-eminent. The *rakshasas*, demons, are much fantasized and typify the clan system as they have none of the features of the kingdom, apart from the very fancy city of Lanka ruled by the ten-headed Ravana. The people of the clans have to be demonized and conquered as that system has now to be annulled. The social system and the political structure of Lanka and Kosala are distinct. Onto these bare bones was embroidered the heroic poetry of the time inspired by a vibrant and creative imagination.

The reason why I think this difference between *itihasa* and *kavya* is significant is that there are alternate versions of the *Ramayana* in various traditions that seem to support degrees of differentiation. The author of the earliest Jaina version states specifically that the poet had demonized Ravana, who was actually human and a respectable member of the Meghavahana lineage that had some association with the Chedis—a well-established set of clans referred to respectfully in the Buddhist texts. Deliberate demonization of the enemy is well known to epic literature and established the necessary contempt for the enemy. Poets also use this method of pleasing their patrons.

So I think that what we have is possibly a tiny kernel of reality—to use a favourite phrase of Basham—in the hostility between two groups of people, where one was demonized, and the conflict was blown up into a beautiful fantasy in the form of a poem, whose literary quality was initially what gave it status. The *Mahabharata* continues to be called *itihasa* and not invariably *kavya*, because it probably dealt more realistically with clan conflict. The fight against Ravana was more than a fight between heroes as it was also intended to show the superiority of kingship.

But, of course, this argument cannot be pushed too far because the term *kavya* is not strictly specific to one category of text. It is almost an all-purpose term for many literary forms of a poetic nature. Even the great history of Kashmir, the *Rajatarangini*, that is surprisingly modern in its narrative and explanations, nevertheless calls itself a *kavya*. So it's not as if one has to be very particular about making a distinction between the two, but the fact that the *Mahabharata* is frequently called *itihasa* seems to suggest that a distinction may well have been intended. In the Jaina version of the *Ramayana*, dating to the early centuries AD, the author claims he is narrating what actually happened, and not what foolish poets have written. According to him, the depiction of Ravana and the *rakshasa*s as demons was fantasy. They were normal human beings. This makes good sense for an epic genre even if it obstructs the poet's imagination.

NB: While there is this distinction, it might be interesting to see the battle over different kinds of interpretations of the stories. Now, when somebody's saying believe in me, I'm saying the truth....

RT: Yes. But he's presenting a counterstory.

NB: He's presenting a counterstory. And to legitimate a counterstory, you have to assert a certain authenticity and develop a language to define that authenticity. So what is maybe going on is a battle for the more legitimate acceptable version, which is part of the politics of the time. Now, the problem with historical thinking is that very often we have counterposed history to the mythic or the literary, and seen a transition from the mythic and the literary to the historical, and seen that as a progressive transition—this is more authentic, this is more rigorous, this is more scientific, and that is the realm of the fictive. Now, that's something which possibly is a problem. Would you see that as a problem?

RT: I think to state the distinction so sharply as, 'This is assumed, and this is actually what happened', between myth and history, is problematic, because I believe that the interest for the historian in mythology is that mythology need not be narrating the actual description of events, but is articulating some social assumptions of the society from which the myth comes. I think it is important to recognize that however exaggerated the story may be, it has to be acceptable to the people for whom it's written, or has been created. By acceptable I don't mean they take it as the reality, but that they associate with some aspects of it. Therefore, it is suggesting something about the society from which the mythology is coming. I think the historian apart from showing that it is a myth has to enquire into why it is acceptable. But again, as with the oral tradition, the historian has to learn the method of analysing mythology, and not take it at face value. Our problem is that some people read a myth literally and say, 'Therefore, this follows....' The fact that the myth is hidden behind veils of meaning makes it necessary for the historian to understand and pull aside these veils before he or she can proceed.

Since we are discussing the function of the historian and the theories of explanation that are used, I would like to clarify a couple of points. First, in underlining the importance of reliable evidence I am not arguing that evidence alone matters when making a historical generalization. The questions that are asked of the evidence and the manner in which it is used in reconstructing the past have equal importance. History does not stop with merely displaying the evidence in the hope that it will speak for itself. Questions have to be asked of the evidence and the historian searches for answers. The historian's intellectual understanding of the subject determines where and how she searches for evidence, selects the evidence, assesses its reliability, asks pertinent questions from the evidence, uses the answers either for guiding her search for more evidence, or for applying rules of causality, and for constructing a historical generalization.

In accepting this as the task of the historian, I have differences with some aspects of positivist history as I have with Postmodernist explanations. Evidence has to answer relevant questions and the more questions the better. Searching for evidence cannot be an arbitrary matter since the search is related to the questions posed. The questions asked of the evidence cannot be arbitrary and the answers have to be placed in some order of priority when providing an explanation. Therefore, an initial hypothesis is necessary, but this could well change in the course of research. My problem with positivism is its inclination to say that what can be observed can be classified, as in the natural sciences. The social sciences require more flexibility. Causal connections are necessary, but need not be rigid, and there can be an element of choice in where the emphasis should lie. Evidence in itself does not speak as it always requires the person who reads it. Research based on positivism does not necessarily go into new directions after the initial infusion of rationalist thinking. However, this thinking can assist in providing more information. So although one may question positivism as the major theory of historical explanation, strands of this thinking do enter historical research.

But to argue, as do many Postmodernists, that words and language exist in some kind of pristine purity, and that historians, and others put meaning into them, is what I find unacceptable. Postmodernism may criticize rationality in the social sciences and argue for taking the irrational more seriously, but I would not concede this as essential to understanding history. Nor do I agree with the contention that the past is not discovered, but is created by historians. This annuls the work of finding texts and inscriptions and of certain kinds of investigation into the past such as that of archaeologists and suggests that artefacts, museums, and monuments do not contribute to knowledge about the past. Since this evidence is not an abstraction, its reading is conditioned by the physicality of the object.

If all explanations are said to be of equal value, then this argument nullifies the entire enterprise of research and reduces it to a valueless exercise. As has been said often enough, if nothing is true or objective, how can we take the statements of Postmodernism to be true? Admittedly, I am not speaking from an in-depth reading of the Postmodernist texts as my reading has been marginal. The one aspect that did interest me was the idea that we haven't really prized apart words and concepts sufficiently so as to arrive at meanings that are not immediately apparent. But as to its being a new approach to knowledge, unfortunately I found it took me nowhere. I suppose some braveheart could do a Postmodernist deconstruction of all the texts I had used in my study of the narratives on Shakuntala, for example, but I refrained from doing this exercise as I realized that the counter-narrative this might produce would have little to do with what I was researching.

NB: Could I come in here? What you say may be true for some versions of Postmodernism, but not all. Like all intellectual traditions, Postmodernism does not speak with one voice. Can we really reject all the ideas it has thrown up? Let me mention only a few. First, Postmodernism forces us to question our certainties, the ideas and categories that we often took for granted. It asks us to query those categories (for instance, the Orient and the Occident, the primitive and the modern), and look at the politics of their production and circulation. Second, it questions the idea of a universal reason. Modernity is founded on the notion of a transcendental reason, and modernist metanarratives of history track the historical unfolding of this reason within society. Critics of modernity have sought to strip away the veil of reason to demonstrate the power it constitutes. We know imperial expansions have proceeded under the banner of reason, and wars have been waged under the slogan of reason. Third, while modernity has opened up spaces of freedom and liberty, it has also created institutions of control and repression that police and discipline our lives and the world we live in. Celebration of the modern does not allow us to adequately explore the complex ways in which these forms of disciplining work. And, finally, about language and image. It is true, as you say, some forms of Postmodernism explore language at a rarefied level. But one of the ideas we can draw from the linguistic and discursive turn is that languages, discourses, images, signs, and symbols matter. They are constitutive. They do not just reflect the real, they mediate and help fashion the real. So historians who are influenced by such ideas are exploring the ways in which these images are produced, the way they circulate, the forms in which they are internalized and reconstituted. Such analysis does not necessarily proceed at a rarefied level.

I am not suggesting that Postmodernism cannot be criticized, but only that we should not dismiss these ideas without a real engagement. My feeling is that many in your generation in India are cursorily dismissive. And I feel you are influenced by the linguistic and the cultural turn, but are apprehensive about associating with them. Many of your recent books bear the imprint of these ideas.

RT: I would agree that to probe further into the construction and meaning of texts and symbols is necessary. But my problem is when such studies become an end in themselves. Causation based on reasoned argument is preferable to arbitrary connections. There is after all a context to word and form and the historian is expected to try and enlighten one about the context. I am not apprehensive about associating with the views of the Postmodernists, but I must mention the problem that quite a few of us have with the inaccessibility of some of their writing. The words that we commonly use are given a different, perhaps technical, meaning, and the construction of sentences can be quite opaque. I may well sound like a philistine in saying this, but accessibility to ideas should be central in these debates.

Yes, Postmodernism does ask us to re-examine that which we have taken for granted and to question our certainties, that it replaces with a range of uncertainties such that they disallow any kind of certainty. One could argue that, instead of dismissing all certainties, some are necessary if only to be questioned so that more precise certainties can be arrived at. Querying accepted categories, I would argue, is not a contribution only of the Postmodernists. Every new theory of explanation begins with querying existing categories. Examining the politics of the production and circulation of existing explanations precede Postmodernism in the ideas of historiography that prevailed earlier. Looking more critically at the idea of reason may be characteristic of such thinking, but the fact of questioning arises from reason and doubt. Modernity alone has not created spaces of freedom and liberty as well as institutions of repression. Both have existed since early times. The Shramanic and Charvaka traditions had their spaces of freedom, and Manu's code has legitimized the repression of certain groups for centuries. Modernity has in fact made us aware of this, but has also introduced new methods of continuing it.

Whilst we are on this subject, let me also address a question that is not entirely disassociated with these interventions and is commonly asked by non-historians. Societies have multiple communities and each has a right to construct its own history and believe in it. Such histories are stand-alone and independent and don't necessarily disadvantage anybody else's history. So why not accept them as such? This is not as easy as it sounds. These are essentially narratives relating to the past of a particular group of people, who together with others form the society. The independence of these stories can only be maintained if there are wide-open spaces between the groups and a fair amount of non-connectivity. This, of course, does not happen. The moment they come together, one story will impinge on the other, either making it the basis for negotiating a closer coexistence or an excuse for conflict. Historians have to be made aware of these narratives, to apply to them the litmus test of reliable evidence, and to gauge which might enter the regular portals of history as sources reflecting, for instance, the visions of how people liked to think of their past. This is now happening in as much as history searches for diverse sources coming from the communities that constitute the society.

Some of us have argued that the history of India as constructed by Hindutva ideologues generally fails the test of being history since it is intended for political mobilization. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us as historians to ascertain who are the people thus constructing the past, and is the establishing of the Hindu Rashtra the teleology of this believed history? Which are the audiences for whom it is intended and what are the methods of its propagation? And how does this claim to history weave in the narratives of smaller groups who may or may not be sympathetic to the bigger idea? It claims to be presenting an alternative history to what we have taken as the history of India so far. Another instance would be that if it is argued that all Aryans are indigenous to India, and presumably all the original inhabitants of India were Aryans, then how far back do we take this and how do we explain the emergence of the Aryans at whatever point they emerged? Surely the Aryan should be defined and note be taken that the definition of Aryan changed through history. This has to be discussed and, if there was an onward march of Aryans in history, then in order that the word can be used today, this has to be shown. But the importance of this kind of analysis that has been made by some scholars has not become part of public discourse. There is a striking difference in how ideas and theories are presented. Most professional historians publish their ideas in academic and professional journals, if possible peer-reviewed, and are anxious about reactions from other professional historians. Those who use history for mobilizing political support and are often not professional historians prefer to use the varieties of media—print, audio-visual, and social media—perhaps in order to indulge in their favourite pastime of abusing professional historians and referring to them as Commies, Marxists, and lefties!

III

Modern Writing of Early Indian History

The Orientalists and the Utilitarians

RJ: What we have said until now brings us to the question of modern writing of Indian history. When did the modern writing of Indian history begin?

RT: I guess if one takes a common definition of modern, it begins with James Mill, who wrote *The History of British India*, published in 1817. This established the colonial periodization of Indian history because Mill wrote about three periods: Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization, and the British period. That periodization has continued, and still continues under the labels of ancient, medieval, and modern India. An attempt to break away from this was to introduce the early medieval period from post-Gupta times to about the thirteenth century. The demarcation of this period from the ancient is required except that I don't think any of the labels carries much meaning in the way in which we look at periodization these days. I have used the label of Early India that incorporates the Ancient and the Early Medieval, but I do emphasize the demarcations within this span, and these require more precise labels. It does at least allow for the continuity of Sanskrit and Prakrit sources into the second millennium AD, relating as they do to major changes in political, economic, social, and religious institutions within this time span. With the earlier periodization, Sanskrit sources were virtually terminated in AD 1000 and there was a switch to the primacy of Persian texts. This was quite unhistorical as there were major sources being written in Sanskrit on various aspects of life in the second millennium AD. Not using the Sanskrit sources, or using some in isolation, cuts out a valuable body of information on the last one thousand years, especially on cultural and religious history. The purpose of periodization is that it be useful to understanding historical change, but the existing labels are not of much help, and will have to be thought afresh.

The turn to using regional language sources that become important to many parts of the subcontinent from the late first millennium AD onwards has also changed the reliance on just Sanskrit and Persian texts. It is initiating new thinking about periodization and the sources of history in the later period.

If we are to continue with what is essentially a nineteenth-century concept, we must insist that periodization implies more than just the religion of the rulers or the use of texts in particular languages as sources. The intention was to indicate substantial changes at particular historical times, which characterized the entire society within that bracket of time. Some labels for periods are chronological, such as ancient, medieval, and modern, with a smattering of suggested change, not much more than what the words themselves mean. Other labels can come from entirely different premises and refer to the type of society as determined, for instance, by modes of production. Thus, Marx's periodization for Europe was Primitive Communism, Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism, and Socialism-Communism.

This need not apply to all societies. Periodization such as this is determined by questions relating to the functioning of society in its totality. Others have suggested hunting–gathering, pastoralism, agriculture, and urbanism. These have been described as insufficient and having variant forms, and not necessarily moving in an evolutionary manner.

Periodization as used in history is an attempt to capture the essential characteristics of an age. The question is what motivated events and actions and did they subscribe to one dominant characteristic feature?

Mill's periodization was based on the religion of the rulers. There was, therefore, a long stretch of Hindu rulers, then a lesser stretch of Muslim rulers, and then came the British. There was another theory that he, together with most colonial historians, endorsed and that was that the rulers of India, one and all, were what in the nineteenth century were called Oriental Despots. They were despotic rulers who did not allow power to any other category of persons. This was to be an influential idea in the European understanding of the Indian political past. A second theory drawn from his periodization had a major political impact on Indian thought and politics and continues to be central to Indian politics today. This theory was that the Hindus and Muslims were two monolithic religious communities, continuously hostile to each other. This was the basis of the two-nation theory. The corollary to it has been that a third party—the colonial power—was required to restrain this hostility and maintain a proper governance of the territory. This was a commonly held justification for colonial rule.

RJ: When you distinguish between the two major strands of European interpretation of Hindu civilization, the Orientalist and the Utilitarian, it is the romantic view of India that we find so … the trends are practically everywhere in European literature and in European philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Is that influenced by the Orientalist view?

RT: The theory of Oriental Despotism was particularly influential in Utilitarian views about India. They were almost cynical in their understanding of the Indian past, particularly the early Indian past. They argued that there was no state, there was only caste and caste overwhelmed society. It was a despotic state and a static society. Caste was explained by them as essentially a form of segregation determined by racial identities. This was an altogether negative picture. The Orientalists were partially in agreement with this, but showed more empathy in their interpretations of Indian religion and culture. William Jones searched for and wrote about possible parallels between the Hindu and the Greek religions and in the chronologies of past cultures. But yes, the more romantic, the more sympathetically imagined past, was also created by the Orientalists. And they in turn influenced German Romanticism, which, of course, had a huge impact on European thought in the nineteenth century.

RJ: And, of course, they had no knowledge of many of the texts....

RT: No, I wouldn't say that. Most colonial scholars were initially not familiar with early texts, but some European scholars interested in India learnt the languages, read the texts, and studied them in great depth. Remember that this was the age of philological research. However, they tended to read the texts literally, were sometimes puzzled by what they read, and did not probe them much further. There were far fewer attempts to relate the texts to their historical context than was beginning to happen with European texts in nineteenth-century Europe. For much of European scholarship, the Orient was the 'Other' and it was assumed that they did things differently there. The

Other was almost a necessity for the projection of the European Self. The kind of theories that were being applied to European history, and which surfaced in the twentieth century in Europe in the form of the social sciences, were not applied simultaneously to research on Asia, except in the works of a very few scholars.

RJ: Their Orientalist and their Romantic views were not actually historically founded.

RT: No, because their primary interest was not historical analysis as such, but gathering information, especially in areas such as philology and language studies and in studies of religions. Scholars who have since been called 'Orientalists' and those called 'Indologists' did take much trouble to study the texts meticulously and many had an impressive knowledge of the texts, but their knowledge focused mainly on language studies and philology, and this in turn led them to a largely text-based study of the religions and of literature. Interestingly, those who studied the practice of religion at the non-textual level were referred to as ethnographers. History was largely a honing of dynastic history using sources in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Greek, Chinese, and whatever else could be useful. Much of this was also shaped by similar studies in Europe of European and other non-European cultures, so the study of India was one among many. And, of course, history even in late nineteenth-century Europe was just about beginning to draw in themes other than the dynastic and political.

What Is Oriental Despotism?

RJ: In your study of the concept of Oriental Despotism that we later find in the twentieth century with Wittfogel and others, is there a reference to the Persian Empire?

RT: There is reference to the Persian language because William Jones's theory was that Sanskrit, Greek, and Old Persian were cognate languages and, therefore, there must have been some connection between those societies. The reference to the Persian Empire as an example of Oriental Despotism comes into the scheme indirectly when it is said the Greek city-states regarded the Persian imperial system as despotic. Voltaire contests it in his discussion of private property in land. The supposed absence of private property in land was cited as a characteristic of Oriental Despotism. But the nineteenth-century discussion focused more on India and China as examples of despotic states.

RJ: My question is, which concept is more important? Is it kingship or is it empire? Which is more important for this point of view of Oriental Despotism.

RT: Kingship is the more important, but the assumption is that despots ruled large kingdoms that were virtually empires and that despotism is one explanation of how they accumulated so much wealth. But it refers only to the kind of kingship that functions as a despotic system. It does not include all kingship—only a particular kind of kingship. It assumes a pyramidal structure of government with an all-powerful despotic king at the apex. The base is that of an extensive peasantry that produces the wealth that is given in taxes to the king. The peasantry is controlled by a bureaucracy whose power is curtailed because there is no private property in land since all land is owned by the king. This is a crucial feature as is evident even in Hellenistic descriptions of the kingdoms of the east. Berossos writing the history of Mesopotamia and Megasthenes writing on India, in the fourth–third centuries BC, assume the ownership of land by the king except that occasionally a confusion slips in. Terms such as tax and rent have to be carefully defined and often they are not in Greek texts referring to eastern states. The European nineteenth-century theory of Oriental Despotism just assumes that there was no private property in land when they speak of the ancient empires of Asia as by then the kingdoms are said to be empires on the analogy of the Persian Empire referred to in Greek texts. This is evident also in Karl Marx's Asiatic Mode of Production that draws on Oriental Despotism, and which most Marxists have dismissed as historically not viable. Incidentally, an attempt was made to revive the idea of an Asiatic Mode of Production by Karl Wittfogel in his book on the subject, but this had an obvious political agenda and was so evidently based on a discarded colonial interpretation of history that it very soon went into oblivion.

RJ: Was there a comparison with the Roman concept of Imperium?

RT: No, not directly. The Roman Empire would never have been thought of as despotic. Historians such as Vincent Smith and others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries compare the British Empire to the Roman, and describe the former as an inheritor of the latter. But the kingdoms of the Indian past are generally described as despotic and are left at that.

Kingship or Empire?

RJ: When we come to Indian nationalist history, which of these concepts become more important, kingship or empire? Or both?

RT: Indians writing about Indian history and influenced by the nationalist ideology wrote from various perspectives. Some of these are perfectly understandable for the times, but are nevertheless a little curious, whereas others are clearly making an intellectual statement. Thus, one of them insists that Indian kingship was a constitutional monarchy, and the logic of this argument is the same as that of all such arguments, namely, that it implied a superior understanding of governance and politics, and had preceded the British system by many centuries, although the latter was only now being eulogized. It was not the British

Empire that was being compared with earlier Indian empires, and there was no particular interest in the Roman Empire. As far as Indian polities went, many were referred to as empires—the Mauryan Empire, the Satavahana Empire, the Kushana Empire, the Chola Empire, the Gupta Empire, and it just goes on. There's no distinction between the system of kingship and the imperial system although the two are distinctly different.

RJ: There is no sense of empire as, for example, with the Persians, where you have an imperial syndrome. Does the imperial syndrome exist in Indian history?

RT: It isn't discussed at any great length. The title taken by the king who ruled the largest Indian state in precolonial times was quite simple: *devanampiya piyadasi raja Asoka*, which could be literally rendered as the beloved of the gods, good to behold, the king Ashoka. This is hardly an imperial title. Curiously, in an inverted kind of way the really grossly imperial many-worded, grandiloquent titles were taken by kings ruling in the post-Gupta period and sometimes ruling small kingdoms. But by then the title was rhetoric. The title *samrat* referred to in Vedic texts could not have been an imperial title—as some suggest—in the absence of empire, and should more correctly be taken in the sense of the one who was regarded as superior from among many others. Its use as an imperial title is more common in modern times, possibly as part of the projection of greatness from the past. Ashoka has been referred to as Samrat Ashoka in popular usage, when great emperors became a necessary part of the national furniture. The Achaemenid kings of Persia by contrast took grandiose titles from the start. We term the Mauryan state an empire because of its size and its diversities that required more than just a simplified and centralized, direct administration. At least, that is what I have argued. For most, it is simply the size that constitutes an empire.

NB: Would you say that the idea of the empire, and the whole emphasis on conquest and expansion, was related to the nationalist project of demonstrating that India was spatially and politically united? I mean … a desire to trace a long history of unification.

RT: Up to a point, yes, but not entirely so. Possibly, as nationalism progressed, it was thought that there was always a unified India as a precursor to modern times.

NB: Was not the idea of empire also that India was one … a territorially unified space? And focusing on that….

RT: The idea was that India was one among imperial systems. The attempt may also have been to suggest that there were Indian empires prior to the British one. It was implicit in the colonial use of the term 'the British Dominion' or 'the British-Indian Empire'. 'The British Empire' meant more than India, but in nationalist thinking 'British India' was seen in terms of an India that had existed as a nation even earlier. Interestingly, when reference was and is made to the indigenous and the alien in India, the geographical boundaries even in cultural terms of this demarcation are the boundaries of British India and not the possible boundaries of earlier times. Perhaps in the absence of modern cartography, boundaries in the premodern period could not be delineated with certainty. The definition of Indian boundaries as those of British India remains entrenched as can be seen in the current debate whether the Aryans were indigenous or alien.

RJ: And this is related to the rise of nationalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.

NB: The writing of the past becomes, therefore, a tracing of the lineage of the nation state in the present. To talk of the space of India as a territorial unit in part becomes part of the politics of unification and homogenization of the space into a territorial unit.

RJ: So the key question would be, which intrigues me as a non-Indian, what would have been history writing without the discovery of the Indian past by the colonial historians?

RT: I suppose, history in the form in which we recognize it now would go back to the late post-Gupta period, when the decipherment of inscriptions was perhaps less impossible since the script of those times was a little closer to a proto-Devanagari. That is also when the culture of the elite begins to take a recognizable pattern and is spread in many parts of the subcontinent. The writing of what we recognize as a historical approach wouldn't go too far back. The earlier Mauryan period and the reign of Ashoka, described at some length in Buddhist sources of the mid-first millennium AD, Ashoka being a major patron. The *Puranas*, however, of the same period, referred to him in the *vamsha-anu-charita* section (the succession lists), merely as a name in a king list. But the Buddhist sources go to great lengths to describe what a magnificent king he was, some descriptions being quite fanciful. Both the discrepancy and the parallelism in traditional Brahmanical sources, and traditional Buddhist and Jaina sources, are worth investigating. And then in the second millennium there is a flood of material in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic, in the lengthy descriptions of visitors to India, and in texts in the regional languages.

But there is also the question of the form that was taken by texts that represented some historical consciousness, but recorded it in a different way. The representation of the past then becomes a study in itself, as I have suggested in *The Past Before Us*.

NB: I think the question that Ramin was trying to push at was … can you imagine the making of modern history, that is, the constitution of history as a discipline, without the intervention of the British and their 'discovery' of archaeology, the past, and the sources? Do we not see a move towards the professionalization of the discipline of history at this time?

RT: That question could be asked of many parts of the postcolonial world—entities that became independent nations after having been colonies. The discipline of history, as we use it now, is being applied to many genres of history in various parts of the world. It is changing as and when new techniques of analysis are explored with new or existing genres and records. Or when other new disciplines are drawn into analysing historical records. It's not just a question of history writing, it's one of using knowledge in new ways. The same holds true for Europe when one observes the shift from narrative history to historical reconstruction using questions from the social sciences and, more recently, from the sciences. The social sciences developed through the data brought in from non-European sources as much as from the older European sources. If, for instance, gift exchange has become a significant aspect of the study of the economy and society of premodern times, it comes also from the observation of such processes in non-European societies that are then applied to the early European.

Take archaeology for instance. This is a case of the entire technique, method of investigation, and interpretation of archaeological data being taken from European practices. Yet no one accuses an Indian archaeologist of giving a westernized view of the Indian past. Yet in history, there are techniques and methods of investigation and reconstruction that draw from European practices, that are immediately attacked as being alien to the Indian way of thinking.

Archaeology arose from a mixture of curiosity and common sense. It was then extended to include scholars of ancient texts who provided comparative data. Today, the cutting edge of archaeological method and techniques of analyses are moving into the hands of a variety of scientists, making the scholars of language in some kinds of archaeology, a trifle redundant. The interaction of traditional scholars with increasing numbers of modern scientists in new disciplines provides the motivation on a few occasions. This is so evident in the way studies of DNA are beginning to challenge early history, with results that geneticists regard as sometimes reliable and sometimes far too partisan. The basic study of DNA as applied to the early past lies with geneticists, although historians and language scholars provide occasional inputs. But this study is still in its incipient stages and requires more analyses before it can be taken as dependable evidence.

And then there is also the fact that contemporary knowledge is not tied to one society or culture—in fact knowledge has never been—so the problems of one culture can become universal problems. The decipherment of the Harappan pictograms/script is now being attempted by many scholars and many more amateurs all over the world.

So to answer your question, I suspect that even without colonialism we would have arrived at the modern techniques of analysing history, if later rather than sooner. And, of course, history is not an isolated subject. Should we have acquired knowledge from beyond our frontiers as occasionally in pre-modern times, it would have meant appropriating knowledge in a variety of fields. As is clear from our current situation, this process brings its own problems of identity and differentiation, but it has been unavoidable. If there had not been colonialism, there might well have not been something like a market economy, but in any situation where the world is brought close through enforced links, the investigation of knowledge and the ways of formulating it would have been open to many societies.

India without the British

RJ: But if India had not been colonized by the British, you would have had a continuity of the Perso-Islamic domination and their view of history.

RT: Not necessarily. Societies are not static and there would have been change, but it would have assumed a different pattern. The recognition of change is evident when one reads the Sanskrit texts of the second millennium AD and the commentaries, quite apart from texts in other modern Indian languages. But even if there had been continuity, it would have been for a limited period and only in certain contexts. As it is, there were two fascinating trends emerging in the second millennium AD. One was that there were many commentaries in Sanskrit on earlier Sanskrit texts, introducing some of the questions that were now being asked of the changes that had taken place. For example, the earlier *Dharmashastra*s (Brahmanical social codes) hardly discussed the status of the temple priest vis-à-vis the *brahmana*, who was conducting Vedic rituals, as there were no temples in the earlier period. But when temples later began to be built and became large landowning, commercially active institutions, from the late first millennium AD onwards, the *brahmana*s attached to the temple were its administrators and their status had to be sorted out. So texts of the last thousand years had to discuss such questions. The categories of *brahmana*s as administering religious enterprises and institutions are specifically mentioned in later inscriptions, as also *brahmana*s who carried out secular administrative functions as officials.

And there were advances in astronomy and mathematics with theories going from India to Baghdad and Samarkand and from there to Europe. Why do we never examine what might have been the impact of these ideas on Indian society? There was a multiplicity of texts and compositions in the regional languages with many questioning established ideas. We have examined these, but largely from the perspective of the practice of religions and of language studies. We have not asked the fundamental question of what new concepts were they introducing other than those of religion. Amir Khusrau was a Sufi and used a musical form as part of the ritual of worship, the *qawwali*, disapproved of by Islamic orthodoxy, and that is what he is widely associated with. But he also studied astronomical instruments as he was interested in astronomy. He supported the theory of the earth going round the sun, again contradicting Islamic orthodoxy. Did this interest arise from his familiarity with the debate among Indian astronomers?

Such studies might illumine the other strand of the second millennium AD, namely, the interest taken by the Perso-Islamic groups in India in non-Islamic thought. We have heard about Akbar and Dara Shikoh ordering translations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Upanishads*. What about those who worked with the mathematicians and astronomers? We know from west-Asian sources that such studies were carried out among the scholars since there are references to them in these sources. There is much praise for Indian scholars in these fields. Were the texts written in Sanskrit in India, as is likely, and if so, who translated them into Persian and Arabic? Were there scholars in India doing these translations or did the scholars in Baghdad know Sanskrit? It has been argued that the Kerala mathematicians had discovered calculus by the fifteenth century. Did the discovery stop in Kerala, and if so why did it not proceed to north India and west Asia? Or did it proceed, but we don't know? Maybe the intellectual reality of the second millennium AD was not so much the dominance of the Perso-Islamic tradition as the creation of the Perso-Indic tradition, and this would have had infinite possibilities had the British not arrived on the scene.

NB: I'm not sure whether we can really operate with such counterfactuals in thinking about the past.... I think it would be unhistorical to imagine, 'What would have really happened if the colonial intervention had not happened?' Because the possibilities are multiple....

RT: One of the things that would have happened in the absence of a colonial intervention is the breakup of the Mughal Empire, which would have meant many regional states. These regions had already started writing about the past in the local language, whether it was Marathi, or Bengali, or Telugu, or whatever. That would have continued. There would have been more varieties of writing about the past in the different states of India, rather than an attempt to write a history of the subcontinent as was done by Mill. The genre that came to be established at the end of the first millennium AD was the chronicle of a regional kingdom. This was composed first in Sanskrit as *vamshavali*s, and later as chronicles in Persian at the court of the sultanates. They continued to be written during the Mughal times and in some places the local, regional language was preferred. Perceptions of the past as they come through in these texts need to be seen by juxtaposing the texts and listening to them as a diverse variety of voices, not by pushing them into compartments labelled Hindu and Muslim and shutting out the individual voices. Doing the former would have given us a far better idea of what was the history of that time, and what later went into the making of a national history.

NB: That's possibly to do with the constitution of the nation state in the colonial period. The writing of the nation into history becomes part of this process of unification. In other countries, too, as nations have come into being since the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth, the formation of the nation has been associated with a reinterpretation of the past in nationalist ways, whether it's Italy, Germany, France, or Britain.

The constitution of the nation state in most countries implied a reworking and rethinking of history in ways that foregrounded that unity of the nation, projecting this unity back into time.

RJ: Yes, the constitution of the nation state is one point, but the other point is how European historians viewed and understood these different nation states. I think India is a particular case, which is not necessarily true for many Arab countries.

RT: Well, yes. Can it be that from the eighteenth and certainly in the nineteenth century, the concept of the world being divided into civilizations comes to be established? As part of this, the concept of an Indian civilization became clearly defined. In the concept of an Islamic civilization, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia are really not central, the centre being Arabia and Persia. So when there are these civilizational blocs, China, India, Islam, Europe, then that area becomes an area of interest, and there follows a civilizational comparison.

Culture or Civilization?

RJ: So would you distinguish, as the Germans do, between culture and civilization? What is the difference between Indian civilization and Indian culture?

RT: I think there is a difference, because in a way the plurality of cultures make up a civilization. Culture has a far greater plurality than civilization because of the way civilization is defined. There can be quite a few cultures that constitute the area of what is called a civilization. The latter has a narrower definition. Let me try and explain that in a different way. I, personally, am doubtful about the concept of civilization as usually defined, where it refers to a single territory, a single religion, a single language. This definition would not strictly apply even to the Greek and Roman world. I think this concept of civilization became convenient to colonial scholarship and this neat division of the world was adopted initially as comparison, subsequently as convenience. For me, the existence of a civilization is possible only if it is porous, and there are interfaces all along its supposed borders with cultures on the other side, and it can fade from one into the next. One analytic move may be to try and redefine how the category 'civilization' ought to be viewed, as an ideal category, what ought to be its defining characteristics. The other, more important, is to see how the category has been historically defined and deployed—the politics of its use. Within modernity, the civilizational narrative has too often primitivized those seen as non-modern—those who do not conform to the criteria of being modern as defined by the West. Colonial powers have deployed the civilizational narrative to conquer and colonize—it was as if the West, as the embodiment of civilization, had the historic task of transforming the barbarians. Africa was seen as a place without history, without culture; by comparison, India was possibly better treated—at least by the Orientalists.

Yet, despite all the Sanskritic culture that they used as the foundation of Indian civilization, India was described by them as lacking a sense of history. The ancient Indians were said to have had no historical writing, barring one text—the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana. Contesting this has been my lifetime project, since I argue that every society has a sense of the past and represents it in various genres as did the early Indians, and many if not all of these, reflect a historical consciousness.

But I think there's another aspect to this as well, which is that when Europeans were trying to understand other cultures, the essence of the particular 'otherness' was absolutely crucial. So they viewed the other as another culture. It could be defined as a culture or a civilization or however one chose to define it, and the emphasis was on 'whatever it is that we have, they do not have it'. The otherness became very important to the self-definition of the European.

RJ: This is Montesquieu's question: '*Comment peut-on être Persan?*' How can one be Persian and not French?

The Idea of the Indian Nation

NB: In your first Penguin textbook, there is a critique of a certain kind of nationalist history, in particular, of the efforts by scholars to discover the constitutional state in ancient India, or identify glorious ages of great developments.... That was in the 1960s. How would you develop this critique of nationalism today? How would you see the writing of your generation ... many of whom were also writing national histories. For instance, doing a history of a region often became a way of writing the nation. Knowing about the region was seen as necessary to know the nation ... understand the peculiarities of the regions, see how they relate to and interact with each other, and constitute the nation ... how the cultures fuse and mix and how this plurality creates the basis of Indian culture. Writing history thus becomes part of the making of the nation state ... a way of incorporating the regions into the nation. How would you react to this type of nationalist history today? Do you see any problem with such a way of looking at the past?

RT: Can I just comment on the earlier point? Because otherwise I'll forget what I was going to say. I think one very fundamental difference between earlier nationalist historians and what we were doing in relation to ancient history is that the nationalist historians were looking at the past as the golden age, the utopia, and arguing that if we cannot get back to that kind of past, we can at least hold it up as the exemplar. Our difference with this was that we saw the importance of the nation, the building of the nation, but we were projecting all this as necessary to understanding the present and glimpsing perhaps a sense of the future. It was the future of the nation that had to be built on a rational understanding of the past. I think that that was one sharp difference. They're both in a way national, the early nationalists being in some ways, I suppose, more national than we were! We weren't bereft of nationalism, but we were looking at the future, looking at the way the past relates to the building of the future and, therefore, were asking for a rational, realistic understanding of the past, not only as building material for a past utopia. The search for this understanding required us to question and to prise apart the institutions of the past, and this meant questioning colonial interpretations which also brought us into conflict with some of the early nationalist interpretations. Let me add, especially in the study of ancient history, the 1960s and the 1970s at the historiographical level, saw the gradual shift in ancient history moving from being a part of Indology to becoming a part of the social sciences.

NB: Yes, there is undoubtedly a radical shift. That's one part of the project of that time. But I'm thinking more in terms of the space of the nation. How does one conceptualize it in history … as a process … and how is the writing of history implicated in that process. If we see unity as a positive value then a set consequences follow. We see process of unification as positive and the rise of regional kingdoms as negative, one representing centrifugal forces the other centripetal, the latter is seen as regressive. We project the fear of regional autonomy back into the past … and see the integration of regions and cultures as progressive. In such history writing, the idea of unification and integration becomes the central focus of analysis, the framing tropes. Therefore, the movement from small chiefdoms, kingdoms, and regions to the nation is analysed as progress in history. Do you see any problem with that?

RT: There is a problem with that and it did strike me. Not so much in the writing of textbooks for middle schools as in the first Penguin History that was published in 1966. The problem is that when one is looking at cultural integration, one has to assume the spread of a similar kind of culture. In India we begin with a question mark as we do not know the language of the Harappans and, therefore, have a partial understanding of their culture. Then followed the Vedic culture, the language of which may well have been relevant only to the upper castes since the popular language that emerged in the first inscriptions and for quite a few centuries was Prakrit. The spread of Sanskritic culture that penetrated more widely came later from the mid-first millennium AD. This is familiar to us from the royal courts and their courtly literature, the temples and sacred texts, the scholarship of the learned, the inscriptions of what one might call the petit aristocracy, and its general use by the upper castes. But there are parts of the subcontinent which are viable parts of the Indian nation and had nothing to do with either the Prakritic or the Sanskritic culture until more recent centuries. This would include the north-east and, in effect, parts of eastern India, and many large pockets in central India. Further south, one moves into another language area with Dravidian, but also after a certain point of time the entry of Sanskrit, although at a socially more restricted level. How is this to be integrated? Historically, it becomes problematic because it has a different history. It takes a strong shape on the historical horizon in modern times. In writing the history of early India, the integration was problematic. So in my Penguin History of 1966, I tended to mention the problem and then moved to other things. But in current times one is aware of its complexity.

NB: The focus on integration often makes us blind to the stories of resistance to the process ... the persistent assertion of cultural difference. If as historians we focus on the logic of unification, in this way then we are likely to marginalize local cultures and the peculiarities of their histories. This can have disturbing consequences.... North-east India is one example.

RT: And it would be the same for central India.

NB: Possibly all the tribal belts. We do not have a Sanskritic culture, nor a peasant culture ... and they are not always settled societies. The history of mobility, pastoralism, forest societies, and other forms of life which cannot be easily incorporated within this story of progress—settlement, unification, state making—get left out of this story of the regions.

RT: You are right, not all of these are societies that conform to a social and economic pattern. The conformity extends to upper-caste society, but the society of the majority—that of the lower castes and those outside caste society—is quite diverse in fundamental ways. So perhaps one argues, as Kosambi does, that these are in fact the examples of living prehistory, that they are not survivals, but they continue to live in a particular way, and this reflects on the nature of Indian society that allows these groups to live in their own way, either beside or within the mainstream society. And that raises interesting but complicated issues. It's difficult to discuss this cogently in a popular book without reducing it to slogans.

Tradition and Culture in India

RJ: You distinguish between Indian culture and Indian civilization, but do you also distinguish between tradition and culture in India?

RT: Well, maybe I'm conditioned by my little foray into archaeology, but for me culture is in fact a pattern of living—what you do forms a culture. I, therefore, see cultures as multiple patterns of living, some of which are the same as among other communities, and some of which are entirely different. How one can put all these together and talk about a civilization as a single civilization is what bothers me. Because, inevitably, one is left having to talk about the cultures of the elite groups, because when one defines Indian civilization, one defines it as being Sanskrit speaking, with text-based Hinduism as the dominant religion. What about the cultures of those that did not conform because they have been segregated in all the religions of India, as, for example, the Dalit groups, or those that belonged to the 'lesser' castes and observed variant religions of their own making, and the majority of the population that is the women, the lower castes, and Dalits that did not use the Sanskrit language? Such questions do not belong to the past alone as they are with us in the present.

RJ: There is this idea which is very pertinent in your work—especially in relation to contemporary India—of how, parts of Indian culture actually recreate the traditions through selections from the past.

RT: Yes, it's not so much recreating the tradition as defining the tradition. And in order to define a tradition, there is a tendency inevitably to pick that which is going to be useful in the present. This the historian may not do, but the general public does. It need not even be the historical past, but can even be an imagined past. And this is in part where the conflict between the historian and the general public....

NB: Why are you leaving out the historian? The historian, in interpreting tradition, is also defining the tradition.

RT: I am assuming that my kind of history is the kind of history that isn't confined to defining a tradition, or at least not defining it necessarily in the way that some of the general public would want it to be defined.

NB: Well, yes … but the historian's reading of tradition is also, in a sense, political. For instance, against the communalization of tradition, there is a tendency to trace a long lineage of syncretic tradition, a tolerant tradition … histories of collective living amongst communities….

RT: Yes, I think perhaps I would stand partially corrected on that. It is to some degree political, as it has to be in opposition to the communal, but to a far larger extent it is an attempt to reconstruct a more complete past. One is not limited to a search for a syncretic tradition: rather one is trying to understand the fuller picture of what the relationships were between groups.

Tradition and Non-violence

RJ: One of the examples—which I think is very interesting in your discussion of the redefinition of tradition—is the concept of non-violence, or *ahimsa*. From the point of view of some, India has always been the country of non-violence, where you have this incubation of the concept of ahimsa. As you say, 'This is redefining a tradition which might not have been there because there are elements of violence in Indian history'. I think this is a very interesting point which could help us to have a new view of India and its history today, because many people around the world continue to have this romantic view of India as a country of non-violence.

RT: Which we push, because it's to our advantage to do so. Tolerance and non-violence. And goodness knows, it's been no more or less tolerant or violent than other societies.

RJ: Who is this 'we'? Because it's certainly not you.

RT: Not me, but a more general opinion.

RJ: Is this part of Indian nationalist history writing?

RT: It is part of Indian nationalist history writing. Indian nationalist history writing took up these issues in order to differentiate Indian culture from European culture, and to take the stand of being, and having been historically, tolerant and non-violent. They were defining themselves against the colonial power, and assuming superiority over the colonial power on the issue of these two ethical principles.

NB: Would you say that there is a distinction between those who are tracing a long lineage of non-violence and those who are tracing a history of tolerance? Many of us constantly return to the resources of tolerance in order to confront the violence of the present. Would you not see these two forms of return to the past—one to track a history of non-violence and the other to trace the history of tolerance—differently?

RT: Yes, slightly differently, but, on the other hand, the way in which both concepts have been used has been highly politicized....

NB: True, but everyone is implicated in this politicization ... not just the nationalists, not just those who celebrate the tolerance of Hindu civilization, but also the secularists....

RT: Yes, also some secularists. My complaint is always that even though we keep talking about the need to secularize society, we haven't debated in depth the definition of what it means to be secular, going beyond just tolerance. What in the twenty-first century would it mean to secularize Indian society? That exercise has not been done. It's said, 'We have a potentiality for secularism because we are non-violent and we are tolerant'.

Particularly, 'We are tolerant'. Are we really tolerant? And if we are, are we more tolerant or less intolerant than others? What are the reasons for it? They cannot be just religious–philosophical reasons. There has to be something in the way societies function. Some have read it as discrete caste groups which allowed tolerance because each person knew their place in the social scheme and couldn't do anything to change it; and that religion was frequently confined to smaller social groups, where a sect drew on a small cluster of castes. This negated the identities of huge monolithic religions. Relations of tolerance and intolerance were, therefore, determined by the relations between these smaller caste groups. Yet the very definition of what constituted a discrete group was based on extreme social intolerance of the lowest by the highest. And every religion in India internalized this intolerance and had its category of Dalits. But even history, the kind of history I've done, demonstrates that there were groups who opposed such intolerance and others that referred to it, but did nothing. So where does this question of tolerance come from?

NB: As you rightly say, violence is internal to the structure of caste, it is an intimate part of the everyday social life of the past. So any effort to characterize *Indian* civilization and culture as essentially non-violent is unacceptable. It represses the intimate histories of violence. Nor can anyone homogenize the past as tolerant. But can one talk of building on the resources of tolerance—accepting it is only one of the many different traditions we inherit?

In any case ... going back to your earlier point ... we are only talking about a small segment of the society in the past ... we're leaving out large sections of the population which are not part of this culture ... who live differently....

RT: Which are not conforming to it.

NB: Yes, those who have been marginalized by caste society and are not part of the Sanskritic culture, those who experience exclusion and oppression … not tolerance….

RT: I think this is part of the reason why today their resentment is surfacing in such a big way. The crisis also arises from the non-marginalized thinking that, 'These people on the margins are not like us, not like the mainstream, so what do we do with them?' Yet they know perfectly well why there is a difference.

Going beyond the Blurriness

RJ: The dismissing of the antagonism towards the Jainas and Buddhists in Indian history, and also the portraying of Indian history as the history of tolerance and ahimsa, and non-violence, has it only been the work of the Hindu tradition of historical writing? Or were the founding fathers of the modern Indian nation also somehow implicated in it?

RT: The founding fathers also accepted that.

RJ: Why did they accept that?

RT: Because it was useful to say that, ethically, they were superior to the colonizing power. It is tied into the idea of what are the values of the East and of the West, of Europe and of Asia. We once maintained that the West was materially superior, but that we of the East were spiritually superior. This has been a very strong, underlying message through much of the national 'coming-together'. In the context of nationalism, intolerance was not associated with conflicts between the various sects with their distinctive followings. We took our cue from colonial writers, and intolerance was projected as between Hindus and Muslims because that was what the two-nation theory required. But what about the intolerance of earlier times, as, for example, relations between the Brahmana and Shramana *dharmas*? The grammarian Patanjali compares it to that between the snake and the mongoose. The Buddhists at a certain point were no longer a presence and the Jainas were treated as part of the Hindu religion. So tolerance was defined as differences being recognized, and stating that there was little antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. But minor localized antagonisms between various sects were known and their alignments could change. The variety of intolerance was said to be drawn from a version of medieval history and was basic to the colonial reading of these times.

RJ: Do we need a new perspective like that of Nehru in *The Discovery of India*?

RT: It would help.

RJ: And teach it in another way to Indians in primary and secondary schools?

RT: Yes, as this is evident in all histories, no less a history like this one, however much one admires it for its time—it has to be read as history written at a particular moment. It's a history that is reflecting that moment and its historical ideas. I feel that if Nehru were alive today, he would probably write it somewhat differently.

Looking for tolerance and non-violence is fine, but ultimately events have to be analysed in terms of the broader historical context that motivated them, and this requires a careful study of the political, social, and economic factors, apart from the religious, that motivated the events.

RJ: The problem with historians and history writing is that the borders between the heroes and the events in history are blurred most of the time. Maybe because nation states need that blurriness to survive. And this is not only a fact that you see in

Asia, for example, in Japan, India, China, or even Persia, but that you see very predominantly in Europe and North America. But how can historians get rid of this blurriness and try to bring in a new way of reading the past?

RT: I think this is happening now. We are writing histories that need not have heroes, but do have themes. These are the kinds of histories that one is now interested in. This is one reason why we also get into trouble with those for whom history is still a largely national enterprise, but with national defined as religious nationalism. It is, therefore, more politically oriented than the anti-colonial nationalism, culminating in the creation of a religiously oriented non-secular polity. I am using the term 'religious nationalism' or even 'Hindu and Muslim nationalism' to qualify the kind of nationalism I am referring to. It can also be called communalism or communal nationalism. If nationalism is the ideology that goes into the creation of a nation state then it has to work on defining an identity, and nationalisms have different identities. Indian anti-colonial nationalism was an inclusive ideology, and, therefore, used 'Indian' as an identity. It tried to cut across religion, caste, ethnic groups, and all such divisive identities. But the other kinds of nationalisms aimed at creating a state using religion as its identity, as, for example, in the Muslim nationalism that went into creating Pakistan, or the current Hindu identity supporting the conversion of India into a Hindu Rashtra or the Sikh idea of Khalistan. Currently, it is even a narrowly religious enterprise, but who knows what will be the dimensions of the next enterprise in reading history through religion. And then people like me are attacked for being traitors to the nation by writing the way we do, because we're writing a different history. We're writing about different things, and we're writing it in a different way, but we still carry a vision of the nation.

NB: I sometimes see your writing moving at two different levels. In the textbooks, there is a clearer story about the nation state, but in your researched academic articles or books, the stories of unity break down. There is, of course, a framing nationalist narrative, as it inevitably was amongst the historians of your generation. But you are exploring the heterogeneity of traditions, the plurality of cultures. There is a strong argument about the importance of alternate cultures, counter-practices, different traditions. For instance, in your essay on asceticism and the making of a counterculture, you're looking at the practices and visions of the ascetics, and what that tells us about the constitution of cultures of the past. Beneath the dominant Brahmanical tradition, you are searching for the other voices and other traditions. This is something you were concerned with from the 1970s in a certain sense. But I feel these studies did not disturb your picture of the larger narrative of the nation. I don't know whether that's how you see it....

RT: Well, no, I think I see it differently—in the sense that I agree the narrative of the nation is something I have lived with all my life, but I think that these other aspects have gone towards modifying the narrative of the nation with which I started, and have also made me look at other aspects I didn't look at fifty years ago. So to that extent I would say, fundamentally that narrative continues, but it is not just a continuation of an old narrative. The narrative has changed in some parts, has been modified and mutated or even discarded in others, but has had a continuity in still others.

NB: One could also suggest that in your early writings there is a two-fold argument. At one level, there a narrative of a linear transformation of the economy, the shift from mobility to settlement, from pastoralism to settled peasant agriculture, at another level there is the narrative of territorial unification and the making of strong states. Within this linear metanarrative, the histories of pastoralists and forest dwellers, the tribal groups, and mobile artisans get lost … are not adequately explored.… Now, in your later writings, you have the pastoralists coming in. You're looking at the forest societies and the tribal groups.… Once you start taking these neglected histories into account, what happens to the larger story? Doesn't the narrative of settlement and state making, the metanarrative of transition, leave out the history of all those who cannot be incorporated into the story, the people who didn't settle … didn't take to settled agriculture? Large sections who often lived outside the territorial kingdoms … or were not subordinated by the state in the same way.

RT: But that's what I mean by 'modifying the linear story'. That national, linear story then has to ask the question of.…

NB: Don't we see here the influence of Marxism more than the old kind of nationalism? The theories of transition shaped the structure of such narratives.…

RT: Perhaps in the sense that one asks about what is to be said of the 30 to 40 per cent that have not been included? How is one to include them? And so you.…

NB: Does it radically disturb the linear narrative?

RT: It does. I mean, there again if I were doing a textbook today, fifty years later, I would do it differently, because one thinks now about the fact that there are groups who were not seen to be participating to any great extent in this national identity as it has been outlined. It disturbs the story, but more importantly, it makes one ask the question one didn't ask earlier as a historian, which is if they have been left out, then why? Why have they been treated so, not just in terms of the national narrative, but right from the beginning? In the earliest 'historical texts', they are left out or easily dismissed.

Memory and Forgetfulness

RJ: Maybe we can end this part on the relationship between memory, recollection, and forgetfulness. We should not forget that there is always a part of history which is forgotten. I think even in the work of a historian like yourself, which is a very rational way of looking at history, there is still a tendency to forget some parts of history....

RT: I wouldn't call it forgetfulness. I would say ... let me answer this in a different way. I am rather sceptical about the whole theory of how important memory is to history, because I think that memory, like mythology, is a construction. I don't think it's something that comes innately, and certainly a collective memory has to be constructed, thought about, presented to a group of people, and sometimes people can almost be coerced into saying, 'Oh, yes, yes, this is our memory'. So I'm dubious about bringing memory in as a source of history.

Having said that, I think that juxtaposing memory and forgetfulness is really going back to what we were talking about earlier, which is selection. How does a historian, or even a non-historian, looking and thinking about the past, decide that, 'This is something that makes sense, and I want to use it, and this is something that I can set aside'. So it's not so much memory and forgetfulness as what is useful and what is not useful.

RJ: When you say collective memory is a social or political construction, can a historical trauma become a collective memory?

RT: When talking about collective memory, there are categories of such memory that are neither identical nor have an identical purpose. For example, conservative learning the world over has been based on a form of collective memory, but different from a general collective memory. The former is based on the memorizing of a particular body of texts and commentaries on them that are handed down from generation to generation. Frequently, these are religious texts, often deliberately maintained orally to begin with, so as to keep them away from the public, but later converted to a written form, possibly when they became too extensive to be memorized. And today, despite the written version, the *Quran* is still memorized, as are the Vedic texts. The existence of this memory has a relatively limited purpose and audience. Such activities tend to overlap marginally with others that demand an oral instruction and memorization. Music taught without notation is a good example. To some extent, this also affects the manufacturing of objects by hand. But this has taken me away from the question you asked.

I think that historical trauma is a construction which is then located in a collective memory. The question is that when an event happens, how do people react to it? They may be stunned for a brief while, or for a century they'll go on talking about it, and then it peters out. Ten centuries later, it has to be revived. You have to remind people that it happened. And you have to remind them that it happened in a particular way. It gets described as a trauma that existed in the past and has carried on subterraneously to the present. Then it gets labelled as a collective memory. But this is a construction.

RJ: So if you don't remind people, the historical trauma is lost.

RT: The trauma is lost, if it isn't felt initially and nurtured subsequently. I was discussing this, for example, in my book on Somanatha. The notion of a trauma is not reflected in Indian sources, but is presumed in modern times to have existed. The presumption draws on a statement made in a debate in the House of Commons in the early nineteenth century suggesting a trauma after Mahmud's raid on Somanatha. From Britain the idea came back to India and spread. But the people of Saurashtra, where the temple is located, did not refer to this trauma prior to the nineteenth century. They were quite happily trading with everybody that came along from wherever, especially Arabs and Persians.

But just to go back to memory and forgetfulness and what we were talking about earlier. It's not so much forgetfulness, or being aware of an aspect of the past that one has ignored. There are moments when something comes to one's attention and one's reaction can lie dormant or be activated. For example, at a purely personal level in my case, I read Simone de Beauvoir as a student. I thought at length on what she was saying about being a woman in society, the way a woman can take decisions, the way a woman can lead her own life, and this appealed to me enormously. I did not have to consciously apply it to myself, but it became internalized. However, this didn't lead me to write feminist histories. In fact, my history is not feminist, so much so that a couple of my students, and one in particular who is now one of the leading feminist historians of ancient India, Kumkum Roy, has said to me, 'Why don't you occasionally look at history from a feminist perspective?'

In the last ten years or so, I have begun to write occasionally on some historical themes from this perspective. I see it as an aspect that has been neglected by social historians, and inevitably because one has been surrounded by an immense social injustice against women in many aspects of life, one begins to ask about the reasons for this, some of which go back to earlier times. In earlier historical writing, it was maintained that Indian civilization treated all women with respect and care. But when one looks at the evidence dispassionately, one sees that this was not the case. Some were treated with respect and care, but the generalizations about women, especially in the social codes, suggests another kind of treatment. And this is reflected in the few writings that we have from women who were sensitive to this treatment. And it's not just a question of writing about women or not. It's a question of how much of the society of the past one understands if one does not do this.

So it's also that when the world around you is thinking about a particular subject, you become conscious of it in terms of, 'Did that kind of situation exist earlier?'

NB: Well, just to pursue further, two things. One, about oral history. I don't know why you are apprehensive about it. The point you're making about oral history is that oral history is a construct.

RT: Memory.

NB: Sorry, not oral history—memory. I'm not sure why you're so suspicious. Because what you're really saying is memory is a construct. Certainly memory is a construct. But so is every text, as you will agree. All the sources are constructs. All histories are also, in a sense, constructs, to the extent that different historians interpret evidence in diverse ways. But we are reading the sources, and unpacking them, and mining them, and writing on the basis of them ... and we do this by being critical and judging the nature of the sources, seeing who has produced them, what can be accepted, what can be critiqued, how do we interpret them. In a sense, in unpacking memory historians do similar things. Memory has to be seen as another kind of a text which needs to be unpacked and read. If we don't do it, the histories of various social groups who do not produce written texts are lost. African history can't be recovered without exploring memory, for written texts don't exist for many marginalized social groups. And historians of Africa have written fascinating histories by mining memory.

This is true also of histories of 'aborigines' in New Zealand and Australia, or tribal and pastoral groups you're talking about....

You accept the importance of oral history—oral history is really a recovery of the past through memory.

RT: I was being suspicious of memory in the context of juxtaposing memory and forgetfulness. And there is a difference between memory being personal before it becomes a collective memory, and a text being public. But otherwise I would certainly say that if you apply the same kind of analysis to memory as you apply to every other source, then it can be taken seriously as a source. But keeping in mind that because it is literally the past being recapitulated in the present, its vulnerability to interference is greater. If one looks at the Hindu trauma concerning Somanatha and one applies the same kind of analysis as one applies....

NB: True, there can be a political and ideological production of memory, where a certain narrative of an event is circulated, talked and written about, and, over time, comes to be seen as the collective memory of a politically constituted community or group. In such cases, we can study this political construction of memory. This, in a sense, is what you are doing in your book on Somanatha ... you show how Imperial officials produced a specific narrative of the past that in turn helped constitute a specific communal memory ... and this memory got linked to a rhetoric of 'hurt sentiments'. You show how this memory is a modern construction, how it was produced in the nineteenth century. In analysing all this, are you not unpacking the politics of memory?

RT: To that extent, I would say, yes; if memory is one among other sources, or is treated as a source, I would say, 'fair enough'. But if you're treating memory as a special source, and suggesting that memory has a special status in the writing of history, then I'm doubtful.

NB: For some social groups, where the written evidence is not there, or to understand how people saw and experienced events, perceived what was going on, or to....

RT: But you still have to analyse it as a source.

NB: Of course. Like we should. It was only the positivists of the nineteenth century who thought sources are unproblematic and records are transparent.... We don't anymore study any record without analysing it....

Going back to your argument about trauma and forgetfulness ... you are giving us an example of a certain kind of forgetfulness and trauma ... in your book *Somanatha*. You are talking of an event described variously in different texts of the past, forgotten over time, and then a memory of the event as trauma is constituted in modern times. You are describing a process of ideological construction of trauma. But there could be other kinds of forgetting and trauma. Studies of fascism show how the experience of traumatic events is often repressed in memory for a long time. There is a fear of reliving the trauma. Silence and amnesia are ways of negotiating the experience of trauma. Such events are then talked of when the passage of time creates a distance from the experience. Studies of the Partition and other riots in India also show this. There is too often a silence over the experience of rape and violence. Forgetting—silence or amnesia—becomes a way of negotiating the experience of trauma.

RT: I go along with that as an explanation of why there is forgetfulness. But, taking it a step further, if that forgetfulness is to be brought back into history, the revival of forgetfulness or the transformation of forgetfulness into memory has to be analysed as a source to ascertain its veracity. Otherwise even misinformation can be passed off as authentic memory.

NB: Absolutely, I fully agree. The politics of that revival and analysis of the act of forgetting—everything has to become a part of the study of memory....

RJ: Maybe sometimes we need in history to forget, to turn the page. Because otherwise there is no construction of the future, if we do not forget. I don't think every nation can just memorize everything from its history, you know. Every nation has a tendency all through the ages to forget some points just because of the trauma, because of the fact that it has to go beyond it.

RT: Yes, I know ... there is a deliberate forgetfulness too.

NB: On the other hand ... the experience of truth and reconciliation in South Africa shows how recollecting and retelling the trauma of experience can also be a cathartic process; it allows people to negotiate the past not by simply forgetting, but by acknowledging its horrors, and making those complicit in the enactment of horrific deeds acknowledge what they did and publicly admit to their complicity.

IV

Lineage and Kingship

Ashoka: Between the Ethical and the Political

RJ: You wrote your dissertation on Ashoka. Where did this interest in Ashoka come from?

RT: Well, the interest in Ashoka began … I suppose towards the end of my first degree when I started thinking more seriously, although only occasionally, about the possibility of doing research. As I explained earlier, I was very anxious to stay on in London and my tutor Professor Basham thought that working on a PhD would be one way of doing so. Then I had to think of possible subjects to work on should such a possibility materialize. My thoughts tended to turn towards doing a fresh study of Ashoka. When I mentioned this to Basham and a couple of other historians, they groaned and said, 'Not another study on Ashoka! Everybody has written on him.' In a sense, historians of ancient India cut their teeth on the history of Ashoka, and it continues to this day. It has almost become a rite of passage!

I tried to explain that my idea was different and that I would focus on the question of the individual in history. I had read Plekhanov and Croce, and was aware of the contrary views. Are historical events essentially made by 'great men' in the course of the decisions they take that become events, or are great men the medium through which events take place—events that would have normally occurred, given the historical context, but the presence of the great man provides an avenue? Historical thinking at the time tended to concede that the individual in an individual capacity played a crucial part. This question puzzled me and I thought that Ashoka, both as a Buddhist and a statesman, would be a challenging subject for such an exploration.

I was interested in his relationship to Buddhism as a religion, but at the same time he was a statesman ruling an empire with a major public presence, so how did he relate to the two? Vincent Smith, among the earliest of his biographers, described him as possibly having been both a monk and a monarch at various times. This was part of the debate on how committed he may have been to Buddhism. Some referred to him as being primarily a Buddhist, whereas others maintained that his basic ideas derived from Brahmanical theory. I thought that this was somewhat contradictory even if earlier historians had not always agreed on the differences between the two. The one thing missing in this discussion was the idea that he was not an isolated person and had a historical context. He belonged to a particular time and there were problems of that time that possibly he was addressing through his actions and even more through the idiom of his edicts. It was necessary to discover what were the issues that he was addressing. He was the first and virtually the only ruler of India who addressed the public through a series of edicts. These were effectively a dialogue, with an assumed but invisible audience. He was addressing his subjects and touching on matters that seem to have been prevalent in the discourse of those times. That interested me and I wanted to try and understand Ashoka's *dharma*, for example, not merely as Buddhism, but as reflective of his thinking on the world around him. When I read the edicts carefully, I realized that he had a different tone of voice when addressing the Buddhist Sangha as compared to when he was addressing the public. With the Buddhist Sangha, he is the person who knows the correct teaching and is the patron of the sect that is expected to teach accordingly: dissidents have to be expelled from the monastery and have to replace their ochre-coloured robes with white ones to indicate this. The dissidents often established their own sects and this feature became increasingly marked as orthodoxy became more vehement within the Sangha. This is very different from his other edicts that speak about honouring the other person's sect, because all sects and their views have to coexist. I began to wonder why there was a difference of approach.

The ethics he endorsed, for example, were the ethics of both the individual and of the broader society. He was not the individual seeking *moksha*/*nirvana*/liberation from rebirth, for which asceticism was the ultimate way, nor was he liberating himself whilst living in a society as was the householder observing the Buddhist ethic, nor was he becoming a renouncer. This, it seems to me, has been a tension in Indian thought and history for a long time. There are ways in which the individual can achieve liberation—*moksha* (freedom from rebirth)—and much attention is given to that. But, at the same time, there is the greater awareness and consciousness of social behaviour, also tied into liberation from rebirth. The proviso, of course, was that the prescribed rules had to be followed and these rules were not the same for the entire society. There was discrimination against the lower social levels. The tension between the individual and society, which is a tension in most cultures, is something that was implicit in various schools of thought although made explicit in some.

Individual liberation took the extreme form of asceticism. The ascetic moved away from society and lived in isolation. If one is not doing that, yet trying to come to terms with a social system, how does one do it? I think the Buddhists and the Jainas had one solution, which was very popular at this time: one either lived the life of a householder in society in accordance with the prescribed ethical principles, or one opted out of society and became a renouncer by joining a renunciatory order of either monks or nuns if a woman.

One of the themes that interested me, although I didn't write on it in the early years, but on which I wrote an essay later in the 1970s, was the notion of the renouncer representing a kind of counterculture. In other words, the renouncer doesn't leave society, but he, or she in the case of a nun, opts out of a certain social system, and joins another social system. The other social system, somewhat distanced from the general society, presents an alternative to the existing system. So the possibility of people seeing society in a variety of ways was an idea that appealed to me.

RJ: I read your piece on dissent and contestation in India. In your essay you made the point that those who are looking at Indian history from the outside do not consider that the concept of dissent actually exists in India in the same way that it exists in Western history. We can see here a point of juxtaposition between the ethical and the political in Indian history. We are not talking about the renouncer, but about the whole body politic of Indian society, where the personality of an emperor like Ashoka takes shape. Here, you have a political sovereign who at the same time has an ethical stand. He becomes a Buddhist. How do you see this juxtaposition between the ethical and the political in the figure of Ashoka?

RT: I think this was a problem, and in a sense Ashoka's edicts are really raising that issue. It is a problem all the way through.

Earlier, at the time when I wrote my dissertation and the book that followed, it was thought that the tradition of Ashoka as an ethical ruler concerned with social ethics ceased to exist after he died. I think I say so in the book—that whilst he was alive it was a vibrant philosophy, but it just died down afterwards.

But this view has to be reconsidered because in recent times it has been cogently argued that it didn't die down. In fact, there are certain perceptions and ways of thought that develop in the Brahmanical tradition which address the confrontations with the social ethics as propagated by the Buddha, and later by Ashoka and other people of that view. Some scholars are now arguing that, although his name doesn't occur in the Brahmanical tradition, some of these ideas were incorporated, some were contested, and some treated with hostility and rejected. We have to tease out this hidden dialogue from what is being said. Art historical evidence, for instance, seems to suggest a more than casual interest in Mauryan artefacts during the Gupta period.

In the days when I was writing my thesis, sixty years ago, it was also stated that Ashoka was forgotten, except for the Buddhist tradition that kept up his memory and elaborated on it as that of the great Buddhist patron. There are now new perceptions of his role in history. The Buddhist tradition itself didn't suddenly disappear. It petered out slowly, with the encroaching Brahmanical tradition replacing it, backed by royal patronage in the post-Gupta period. Buddhism continued to have a noticeable presence in eastern India and then moved to areas adjoining the subcontinent and beyond where it flourished. It has been argued that some elements of the post-Ashokan Buddhist tradition may have been absorbed into the cultural motifs and symbols of Puranic Hinduism although never admitted directly. Late interpolations in the *Mahabharata* discussing kingship and governance, violence, or the coexistence of religious sects, and such like, are now being seen as possible indications of a dialogue. Hostility, on some occasions among various sects of *brahmanas*, Buddhists, and Jainas, that is referred to quite clearly in texts and recorded in inscriptions, has to be explained. Among the explanations that seem obvious is the competition for patronage from various levels of society, not least from royalty. This hostility was not characteristic of the times, but neither was it absent. Why would Ashoka continually emphasize the importance of tolerance if some degree of intolerance was not being experienced by people?

It would have been helpful if some of the Buddhist monasteries of India had survived as living institutions, as then there would have been a Buddhist presence in India for nineteenth-century Indologists to converse with, as they did with the *brahmana*s on the Brahmanical tradition. Not being able to read the script of his edicts, and not knowing about him from the Buddhist tradition, was what later led to his oblivion. Had this knowledge survived, he would not have been as unknown as was assumed when he was rediscovered in the nineteenth century.

Ashoka and Gandhi

RJ: Could we consider the phenomenon of Ashoka as a process of spiritualization of politics in the same way as we have it later with Gandhi?

RT: No, I don't think so. I think Ashoka is quite clear that he is speaking about categories that are generally social categories. They're all real categories met with in daily life. And his political ethic is concerned with these. He may refer to himself as '*Devanamapiya*', the Beloved of the Gods, but I don't think he took the gods too seriously, judging by his statements.

NB: In your early as well as later work on Ashoka, you have suggested that *dhamma* is a set of ethical doctrines. But you also have a parallel argument in the book that these ethical doctrines at one level are in some ways subordinated to politics … have an instrumental function. While he is talking about tolerance as a moral value, tolerance is also emphasized to mediate sectarian conflicts … all social conflicts … the conflicts between elders and young, conflicts between.…

RT: Teachers and students, parents and children.…

NB: Every social conflict, in some way, is sought to be resolved through the idea of tolerance. You emphasize that this ethical idea is deployed as a deliberate strategy … it has an integrationist aim. It is almost as if it represents a politics of multiculturalism—you don't say it in so many words. This tends to suggest what is happening here is not the spiritualization of politics, but rather the politicization of ethics. It happens both at an individual level as well as a social level. Tolerance is an ethical good as well as a political good. So.…

RT: Where would I place the emphasis?

NB: Yes. How would you conceptualize the connection between the two?

RT: I think the conscious attempt was to emphasize the moral and ethical good. But I think there was an awareness that there were political dimensions to it. Whereas I wouldn't say cynically that he was using a moral ethic to mask politics, I would say he was concerned with a moral ethic, and was aware that, incidentally, it assists in improving the quality of politics. The moral ethic has to relate to the political and social behaviour in a society, and the emphasis would tend to be determined by the problem.

RJ: But the dimension of the political is also very much present in Gandhi. I think in the case of both Gandhi and Ashoka, you don't have just pure tolerance, but there is a dimension of religious pluralism which is consciously constructed. It seems they both believe in the fact that there is a political and social need to have the coexistence of different religions in the Indian society.

RT: Yes, I agree. I would replace religion by sect. He addresses the *brahmanas* and *shramanas* (non-Brahman sects), and other sects. The word *pasamda* for sect has its own history, comparable to diatribe in Greek. Initially, it referred to any sect, but gradually in Sanskrit it took on the meaning of a heretical, fraudulent sect. Although the message, as he conveys it, is seemingly just a message about moral good—tolerance and such like—he is aware of the political dimensions. Therefore, in a sense, my interest was also to highlight the political dimensions and not forget them. He wasn't just a good man insisting that each one must be good to the other. There was an intention and a purpose in what he was doing and the intention was not cynical.

RJ: Are you reticent to make the comparison with Gandhi? Do you think it's unnecessary?

RT: I'm reticent because the distance in time is so immense and the difference in historical context is so great. The nature of the two societies is completely different, and the issues facing Ashoka and those facing Gandhi are disparate, other than the few fundamentals that are the concern of every collection of people living as a society. And Gandhi, of course, doesn't have much use for Ashoka. He hardly refers to him in his writing.

NB: Ashoka doesn't have much use for him.

RT: Yes, you can put it that way. In the course of writing my retrospective essay on Ashoka, I was searching through Gandhi's writings to see if somewhere he has something on this. I thought he might have been one model that Gandhi could have used from the past. But he doesn't do so in any effective way. It's Nehru who was fascinated by Ashoka, but not Gandhi. And I thought that was very significant.

NB: Would you say that this ethical-moral code, as well as this theory of integration through tolerance and non-violence, was a strategy which could only operate at the level of the urban, settled sectors of society? Because you give examples of how he forgot about non-violence when he was dealing with the *atavikas* (forest dwellers). So I would imagine that the tribal groups, the forest dwellers, and others were seen as being outside the pale of civilization, outside the pale of this settled society about whom he's thinking. The non-agrarian social groups couldn't be incorporated into this society through this moral and political philosophy. Did the settled agrarian and urban society define the limits within which the idea of tolerance and non-violence could operate?

RT: There was violence and he states that sometimes it was necessary. This ties up with our earlier reference to ethics and society. The point is that he is ruling and he's addressing those that he probably sees as the more articulate from among the mass of Indian people over whom he's ruling. Obviously, the most articulate society is the urban society, and possibly what we would today call the rural rich, at least to the extent that these groups have left some records of their thought and activities. We do not know the precise nature of the settlements where many of the edicts were located. He asks that his edicts be read out to anyone who asks for them, but his essential audience seems to be more limited. To that extent, I think that these alternative traditions, among the Buddhists, Jainas, Ajivikas, Charvakas, and so on, were possibly more oriented, initially at least, to urban groups. This is not to say that people in rural areas did not have access to the edicts, but merely to suggest that the urban population probably had greater access to seeing them in context. However, one cannot make too sharp a demarcation between rural and urban settlements in early times since the former sometimes shaded off into the latter or were the base from which the latter evolved. The consciousness of bringing in forest dwellers, and those we now call Dalits, that consciousness was relatively weak even in alternative traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and such like. There was a certain acceptance of the fact that some people are born to rule, and some people are born to serve. And the Dalit group was born to serve. There really isn't much discussion about that. Some concessions are made, they're as human as everyone else, and if they wish to become good….

NB: Are they seen as part of civilized society?

RT: They're seen as part of society, yes.

NB: But would the ethical codes apply to these groups?

RT: They would apply up to a point.

NB: But not to the tribals, and not to the forest dwellers.

RT: No, the forest dwellers are a group apart, definitely. As probably were the forest ascetics who were not forest dwellers in origin. But the question remains as to how many people actually took to asceticism in the forests.

Interpreting Ashoka

NB: When you wrote the book on Ashoka, you were critical of some of the nationalist interpretations of ancient India, but if one reads your book, we can also see a powerful nationalist voice speaking through Ashoka. The secular nationalism of your generation—influenced by Marxism—was interested in the ideals of tolerance and non-violence, in the need to empathize with different social groups, to incorporate them into a unity in order to build an integrated society, the national social body. You seem to be reflecting on all these ideas through a study of an individual. So, in that sense, it was a book which embodied the historical consciousness of the new generation of historians of your time, who were looking to the past through a certain set of framing ideas. Would you say that these kinds of ideas in some way informed your choice of study, your reading of Ashoka?

RT: Yes, up to a point, in the sense that I was aware of wanting to take him out of his isolation and place him in a social and economic context. Now, one could argue that this was possibly the influence of some strands of Marxist thinking—that you don't look at an individual by himself in isolation: you have to look at the historical context. And so I was concerned with doing this. I felt that in the nationalist tradition, although the historians all wrote about the society and the economy as the background to the reign of Ashoka, they did not necessarily correlate his edicts and, extending from that, his thoughts with that background. And this was what I was trying to do—to say that even the edicts were not merely abstract thoughts, but that their sentiments and purpose were based on the reality of his times. And I was trying to search for that reality. So the social and economic dimension of the man's thinking, and how it related to ideas of *dhamma*, was something that interested me.

The other aspect of this question arose from my comparative reading in history and, apart from Greece, I read on China as well. The historians writing on these cultures at that time were beginning to give a heavier emphasis to the social background rather than the individual. There was a need to look at the society. And so this, as it were, rang a kind of sympathetic bell in my mind, and I thought that there were other people doing the same thing, and that we should also be looking at the broader picture and seeing what that was all about.

And that does bring in a little bit of my own crisis, which was that I was still influenced by some of the nationalist historians, as is quite evident in that book. For many of them, the assumption was that social and economic history had largely meant quoting the texts that speak about these aspects. Analyses were not so central nor any study of why the texts said what they did. I didn't want to say anything too severe about Ashoka, largely because I admired the person behind the edicts. At one place I did refer to the tone of the pillar edicts from late in his reign, and made a casual remark about the repeated praise of his own achievements as a hint perhaps of a streak of megalomania. I was wrapped on the knuckles for saying that. Reviewers in India strongly disapproved of this remark. But I was delighted when K.A. Nilakantha Sastri, whom many of us admired as a historian, came to my defence in a positive review of the book. The fairly lengthy review referred to me throughout as 'he' and when I introduced myself later to him at a conference, he was visibly startled to discover that I was a woman!

There was some comment on the weaving in of the social and economic background. Was this an indication of using the Marxist method? This coincided with the discussion in the later 1960s at Delhi University when some of us suggested a couple of additional optional courses in social and economic history and were shot down as preaching Marxism. We tried to explain that social and economic history in itself was not a feature of Marxist history as the latter required using a particular form of analysis before it could be called Marxist. But there were few takers for teaching the new courses, so convinced were they that all social and economic history is Marxist. Unfortunately, a few of those not very familiar with the Marxist method of historical analysis, but wanting to be associated with Marxism, also seemed to think that this was so.

I have never thought of the Marxist method being the same as economic determinism. But it was hard to convince even some serious historians of political and dynastic history at Delhi University that the two are not identical. This is something that has dogged me all my life, because people who have not read me assume that I am a Marxist and that, therefore, I focus on economic explanations for everything. I have actually written little on the economy of early India, having written more on society, culture, and religion, which were the areas of my central interest. Even where I have brought in the economy, it is together with a variety of other factors, for the simple reason that I do not write monocausal history. Good Marxist historians do not regard economic determinism as the single characteristic of the Marxist method, and I don't do so either. Economic data has to be analysed from a particular perspective that involves a particular theory of explanation, and it is this theory that makes it either a Marxist analysis or not. The Marxist method is characteristically analytical, with questions that investigate the context and are specific to the theory. Other theories of explanation, even those which are not Marxist, also ask questions, but the nature of questions differs as does the explanation.

It always surprises me as to how few Indian historians in general bother to understand what is meant by a Marxist method, but rush to call other historians at random, Marxist, using the term to condemn them. For that matter, there is a happy unconcern among many with the entire subject of theories of explanation so essential to the social sciences, not to mention the natural sciences as well. I am here referring to historians who take their work seriously and not to the way-out fringe amateurs for whom anyone who does not agree with them is a Marxist and the term is used as a word of abuse! Grappling with theories of explanation requires a considerable reading across various aspects of history, and unfortunately few take the trouble to do this reading.

I was trying to be analytical, and I was trying to ask a set of questions. Therefore, in a sense, there is an underlying tension in the book which I felt when I was writing it. I felt that I was moving from one kind of historiography into another kind of historiography, and I wasn't quite sure how far I was succeeding in making a transition from the one to the other. I was realizing the problems of nationalist historical writing, and also becoming aware that there were other problems in using contemporary theories of explanation, however necessary they may be to historical research. The tangential arguments that the Marxist method can throw up sometimes appealed to me more than the sureties of the causal relationships that we historians tend to make in saying, 'If that was the case then this happened'. So there was a kind of uncertainty, tension, and transition within me that I think is something I see in that book.

NB: Did you repress these tensions?

RT: No, I didn't.

NB: How did you negotiate these tensions? How do you see them getting resolved in the subsequent decades after the 1960s and the 1970s?

RT: I certainly didn't repress the tensions, perhaps partly because I wasn't fully aware of them then. Does one always automatically and immediately recognize the tension within oneself in the course of writing a book? You know how it is when you're in the middle of doing something. I became more aware of the tensions after the book appeared and scholars commented on it. And then in the 1970s I became more aware of the transitions I was making, the degree to which I was still holding on to my earlier theories of explanation, and the degree to which I was questioning some of them. And I say 'some' because I also began to realize that particular aspects of the past could be better analysed not by a single, all-purpose theory, but by juxtaposing the questions that arise from more than one theory.

Let me try and give you an example. When I was examining the section on succession—the *vamsha-anu-charita*—of the *Vishnu Purana*, I had to try and understand why it was written in a genealogical mode with lineages and dynasties. Was it simply because it was referring first to clan societies that identified themselves through lineages, and later to dynasties that required validating a list of succession? In some ways both were exercises in legitimizing the two systems. My recognition of the importance of legitimizing power in various forms came to me from a variety of anthropological readings and, of course, the emphasis that someone like Max Weber gives to it. I finally presented it as my reading that had emerged from various theories of explanation. I was not asking myself whether I was being a nationalist historian or whether I was moving towards another theory of explanation.

NB: The two are not contradictory.

RT: No, the two are not contradictory.

NB: And some of us would see many of you as Marxist nationalists … at one level, you all were recognizing the play of social conflicts and economic forces in history, using many of the Marxist categories in your analysis; at another you were all inspired by the nationalist project of unification and the making of a secular India. The need for a cultural integration of the nation into a unified body is something that was integral to this imagination. Your historical projects were informed by this imagination and helped constitute this sensibility of the time.

RT: Now you are using a new terminology! The nation was not central to these analyses relating to early times, except perhaps in an eventually teleological sense.

NB: In the early decades after Independence, it's perfectly understandable why the nationalist imagination informed intellectual projects ... many of you witnessed the national movement and the partition violence ... you had to battle against colonial and communal ideologies....

RT: Yes, and also, speaking for myself, although it may or may not be true of others of my generation, my nationalism—apart from the fact that I felt strongly committed to the new nation state, and to making it a success—hinged on two things. One was, 'What is our identity as nationalists? We're no longer just nationalists; we have an identity which is emerging. We have all along called ourselves Indians so how do we define that identity in a post-nationalist condition?' And secondly, 'What is the kind of society that we're building? Can we talk about this society as having its roots in earlier systems that have nourished the notions of what are now going into the making of the new society?'

History and Charismatic Literature

RJ: But maybe, unconsciously, you were very much interested by the category of charismatic literature, because in your work on Ashoka, there is a very strong reference to the role of the individual in history.

RT: Yes, this was the tradition of Indian nationalist historical writing.

RJ: And charismatic literature. It was always the big names that were mentioned—Ashoka, Akbar, etc.

NB: As far as one can see, in the 1950s and 1960s, even in the studies of modern India, we have a focus on the dominant tradition. Studies on nationalism focussed on the Congress, and on leaders like Gandhi and Nehru-- iconic figures who mobilized the nation against imperialism. By the 1970s, social dissent and protests started being discussed in more complex ways. There was a shift from a study of iconic to ordinary figures, from Ashoka the renouncer to the wider practices of renunciation. How would you track any such shift in your own writing?

RT: I may not quite agree with how you characterize the change, but yes, there was a gradual change. But before that, let me just say that I was not writing of Ashoka as a renouncer because I have a specific definition of a renouncer. I think there were two strong reasons for the change. One was just getting away from the iconic ideal, moving away from the notion that the individual makes history. And the other was that if you're going to be studying social and economic history, you have to study the organizations and institutions involved in this history. And so, if monasteries are institutions that are involved in the social and economic background of a society, they have to be studied as socio-economic institutions, not as purely religious institutions. They have another dimension that is important.

And therefore, I found myself moving towards looking at the renouncer not just as somebody guided strongly by a spiritual effort, but also as somebody who was aware of taking a conscious decision to join a different kind of society. And this aspect becomes obvious when it is seen that renouncers are not removed from society, but are participating in society, although in a different kind of way from the usual, and this is why I differentiate them from ascetics.

Recently, in a general lecture on women in history, I spoke about the two categories of women whose freedom in society was conceded, though neither received much attention in the social codes. In one case, the freedom came from exploiting a sexual presence and, in the other, from a denial of this presence. One was the courtesan, who went through very rigorous training and then set herself up and was a relatively liberated, independent woman. I say relatively because she was still dependent on society for her livelihood and status. She was feted, was in command of herself and her clients, and was the recipient of wealth. She was choosing a way of life that is not recommended for women in the social codes, the *Dharmashastras*. In fact, her way of life was contrary to the codes, yet if she succeeded she was respected.

And the other was the nun. The nun was important because she was not in fact leaving society and going away, but was very consciously choosing an alternative system. She still continued to meet her family, from whom she could still have an income which she sometimes donated to the monastery, but she was freed of household chores and social obligations. In a collection of poems and songs composed by nuns, the *Therigatha*, some nuns delight in being nuns because they are not doing household chores from early morning to late at night. I thought that that kind of attitude to renunciation was not an attitude that is only concerned with finding immortality or liberating the soul. It is an attitude that says, 'I want certain freedoms, and I want to be free of the kind of life that I'm being asked to lead and I'm going to opt for a different kind of life'. Yet at the same time if someone wished to pursue a purely religious ideal—as probably some did—this was more feasible in a monastery or a convent than as a member of a household.

Let me just add, I did become extremely interested in the idea and practice of renunciation and read quite widely on it in terms of how other cultures and religions handled it. What attracted me to this enterprise was the idea that it is initially a form of protest, however formalized it may eventually become, and to that extent it encapsulated one strain of dissent in Indian society and thought. If ancient India was an ideal society, as we had been taught, then why were groups of people opting out to become renouncers and function in ways directly opposed to the conventions of that society? Was this only to discover ways of liberating one's soul or was there also an element of wanting social liberation? But, of course, not completely so. They were dependent on society for boarding and lodging. According to some cynics, monastic life was comfortable for those who did not wish to work, but generally the monastic regimen involved hard work and certainly required dedication. Let us also not forget that emerging forms of Hindu sectarian monasticism were part of the reason for the expansion and success of some of these sects.

RJ: So if we step out of Hinduism and Buddhism and look towards Islam and Islamic mysticism, which is not very apparent in most histories of India, but is actually part of a huge historical culture, do you see the same form of dissent and contestation in that?

RT: I don't really know enough about mysticism, Islamic or otherwise. Remember that one of the effects of being a good nationalist and being even mildly influenced by Marxism was that one was a trifle suspicious of spiritualism and mysticism and the kinds of philosophies that supported them. This was all seen, in a sense, as somehow irrational.

NB: That's the Other of modernism and rationalism.

RT: That's right.

NB: Only now there is an effort to move beyond such suspicions....

RT: So I would say that over time I did begin to realize that one can in fact write about these supposedly irrational groups as also playing a role in creating social attitudes. After all, in every period in every society at all times there have been groups that have been rational and irrational and have opposed each other. And so you can't just dismiss the 'irrational' groups, you have to say something about why they were present. You may not give them a major role, but you have to explain their presence.

The same holds true for today. There are many 'irrational' groups with what we regard as antisocial aspirations, and some of them put these aspirations into practice as, for instance, when they assassinate those people who endorse the rational. But the motivations among the varieties of the irrational can be different. Not all need to be assassins. Some others may only seek to find their own methods of liberation. There were many who taught, founded sects in the late first and second millennium AD and considerably enriched religion, philosophy, literature, and art. The second millennium far from being a period of slavery for Hindus, when they are said to have been victimized by 'Muslim rule', as is often stated by those who seem not to know about these times, the last thousand years have been a period of much creative articulation in all these fields by people from a range of religions and castes, including varieties of what is now called Hinduism. Such people enter history in different forms. But when as a group they play a social and political role either on the edges of society or quite centrally, then the historian has to explain their presence.

RJ: In other words, you are interested in the social movements of communal ideologies, but not necessarily in individual dissenters.

RT: Let's say I am generally more interested in social movements than in individual dissenters. But let me qualify this by saying that one cannot make a clear demarcation between the two. Individual dissenters are not all mavericks and most are rooted in a social context that contributes in a lesser or greater degree to their dissent. Frequently, social movements were founded around their teaching; hence the study of the movement involves an understanding of the role of the dissenter.

RJ: It's interesting because going back to your childhood you said your grandmother used to take you to the *dargah* of a *pir*. So the Islamic element was part of your upbringing.

RT: But remember, we are talking about two different periods and two different histories when we talk of then and now. In the Panjab of the 1930s, the Islamic element was present in the general ambience and was not regarded as a threat, except perhaps by what was then a small minority. It was not unusual for Hindus to worship at the grave of a *pir*. In some communities the same *sant* (holy man) was worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims, as in the case of Jhulay Lal among others. So there was nothing unusual in my grandmother taking me to the *dargah*. I was not made conscious of another religion by doing so, as it was simply an act of worship, and that was what was important. I hesitate to pronounce knowledgeably on Islamic society in the Indian past because my work has all been in a period before Islam really makes its presence felt. But I do recollect from my childhood and early years a different religious ambience from that which prevails today.

And let me add that in speaking of dissenters in the later period, I was not referring only to Islamic sects, but equally to those that drew inspiration from non-Islamic teachings, and there have been an enormous number of these.

NB: In talking of mysticism why do you use the term 'irrational'? Is it a different rationality, or is it irrational?

RT: As with the word 'radical', the word 'rational' seems to have changed its popular meaning!

NB: If you're using the term 'irrational' in the 1960s or the 1970s it would be one thing....

RT: Now it's different, and I'm using it in the old-fashioned way in the sense of those who do not conform to an easily recognizable, rational way of thinking. Although let me add that some important streams of sects opposed to the orthodox and included in the category of *shramanas* often traced their philosophies back to a support of a rational understanding of the universe. They were dismissed as *nastika* (non-believers) by the orthodox.

NB: Just a small point. I was wondering ... whether this shift to the popular in the 1970s has to do with the nature of international intellectual dialogues you were having at that time with Richard Cobb, Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudé, and others—the ideas of a new social history and history from below begin to circulate at that time. What influence did these ideas of social history have on you and your generation?

RT: I think there were some distinctive happenings in the 1960s. One was that we were beginning to talk about these aspects of history among ourselves without reference to non-Indian history or visiting historians. I remember organizing a seminar at Delhi University with historians speaking about the ideas that influenced the writing of Indian history. It was a small gathering largely of Indian historians from other centres in India and some from Delhi. We recognized this as being something of a departure in our discussions on history. The frequent visits of European historians came later.

From my years at Delhi University, for example, I was made aware of many more different ways of looking at ancient India as compared to my years at SOAS, simply because one was chatting with friends who were in related fields and had different ideas. For instance, there were the megastars, as we called them, the economists at the Delhi School of Economics, who would drift into the common room to have a cup of tea and discuss something to do with land relations or commerce. Someone would then ask casually as to how far back in time did these activities go. Did they go back to early times? And I'd never thought about these things such as how far back in time did some specific ideas and activities go. I had always assumed that they were modern ideas; but then I began to realize that they were not isolated, self-sufficient, and modern. They had some links perhaps with what happened in the past. Then when one started seeing the links, one realized that there might be a different set of questions that could be posed to one's data on the past. This was not to establish links, but just to explore the possibility of earlier forms in the past. So that was beginning to be thought about.

I found that for me the most useful conversations were with the social anthropologists, as I was beginning to question the rigid, structured formulation of caste society that historians had accepted with quotations from Manu's *Dharmashastra* which had been treated more as a descriptive text rather than normative. One had, of course, read earlier sociologists such as G.S. Ghurye and N.K. Bose. The first had commented on the civilizational aspects of ancient India that some of us thought were debatable, and the second emphasized the pertinence of studying the social reality and relating it to texts. The sociologists at the Delhi School of Economics were helpful in other ways. J.P.S. Uberoi provided an initial reading list to start me off; Arvind Shah had worked on bards and genealogists in Gujarat and conversations with him helped me to frame questions relating to my texts; we spent time discussing the intricacies of lineage and caste. André Béteille's descriptions of what he had observed in rural south

India triggered off other ideas. On the wider issues involving caste and status, some of M.N. Srinivas's ideas set me thinking, such as the possibility of applying his theory of Sanskritization to social mobility in early times. This interface between history and social anthropology continued to be a subject of conversation when we set up the Centre for Historical Studies in JNU and I learnt much from long chats with Satish Saberwal.

The annual arrival of historians from Britain and France and their lectures and seminars, were reassuring because a few of their ideas encouraged us in what we were also discussing. Such discussions led us to read history that was coming out of Europe, Japan, and Latin America. So one had the feeling that these ways of thinking were not parochial, but were part of a bigger universe of thought—as indeed we were to discover that they were.

This was also the time when many social scientists visited us from American universities. They were working on the newly established South Asian studies programmes and doing periods of field work in India. The slow process of occasional coming and going gradually took off and increased. South Asian studies in those days were different from Oriental and Indological studies as we knew them from European universities. Perhaps because of the input of social scientists there was a trend to work in the present and then investigate the past. But, of course, there were excellent centres of linguistics and Sanskrit studies in some of the American universities going back to an earlier period. My first visit to an American university was to Chicago in 1968, to give some lectures to students in courses under the rubric of South Asian Civilization then conducted by Sue and Lloyd Rudolph, with whom I became good friends. I was struck by the difference between the University of Chicago and SOAS. My visit to Chicago was memorable for another reason—I arrived on the campus from the airport minutes after the assassination of

Martin Luther King. This was my first experience of a modern city under siege.

Seminars in Delhi and the occasional visits to conferences or universities outside India began to give us the feeling that we were all now part of an international community of historians. We were no longer limited to choosing between colonial interpretations of history and our own, or nationalist historical thinking and the more recent ideas. We were all thinking about similar issues, but obviously thinking differently and that is what made it intellectually challenging. The fact of being professional historians working with new techniques and methodologies in investigating the past was strengthened through meetings and discussions with a larger range of historians. This tended to further exclude the untrained non-professionals, an exclusion made apparent in the more complex use of diverse sources by professional historians when writing ancient history. This was not a case of an unfiltered infusion of Western ideas into our investigation, as some of our critics have tried to argue, since we were also able to use Western methods if need be, and to question the theories about the Orient that had originally come from Western authors. Some of the major critiques of Western thinking about India came from our research. This had not been done before. It was our generation that demonstrated the weaknesses in Max Weber's study of the religions of India or the inapplicability of Marx's Asiatic Mode of Production to Indian society. We worked together with other Asian historians such as Leslie Gunawardana in Sri Lanka and refuted the latter theory, however much Karl Wittfogel and his ilk were pushing the idea. And the irony is that those who are accusing us these days of using Western perspectives of analysing the Indian past are drawing for their foundational ideas, from the theories of colonial scholars on the Indian past.

Communal Ideologies in India

RJ: Is your work mainly on communal ideologies and is Aryanism related to that period?

RT: Obviously not. My work is not mainly on communal ideologies, as should be evident from the study of Ashoka and my continuing research on the Mauryan period, as also from my other books such as *From Lineage to State*, *Shakuntala*, *History and Beyond*, *Somanatha*, *The Past Before Us*, and yet others. But where communal ideologies coloured ancient history, these I have discussed in a separate collection of essays. Communal ideologies are related to the politics of contemporary India so these leave an imprint on how history is interpreted in the present. And yes, Aryanism does attract communal ideologies, as it has been tied to questions of origins and identities, although the more important aspects of this research go beyond the communal.

But neither communal history nor the related aspects of the Aryan problem have been my primary research. This is why I find it very odd that my critics zero in on just one tiny part of my research, namely, the question of the origin of the Aryans, which does not constitute my sole perspective on ancient Indian history, and that they disregard what I have always given primacy to in my writing, namely, the social and cultural aspects of later centuries and particularly to historiography. This focus of my critics reflects their own concerns rather than mine. The claim to origins is so fundamental to their ideology that they cannot move forward to discussing the more significant historical questions about the cultural patterns that emerged from the activities of this period, and which are of far greater historical significance than the genesis of the Aryans. Many, although thankfully not all, of those claiming to have DNA evidence, and claiming that it overturns existing theories, also happily fall into framing their discussions on the basis of Aryan origins.

Communal ideologies enter at two levels. One relates to political activity that is sought to be justified by recourse to giving history a particular twist. The other is to control the context of school textbooks.

There is an ongoing debate about what constitutes history. We now seem to have two kinds of history. One is the academic history that we continue to write despite the attempts of some organizations to get it censored. The other is the prevalence of the Hindutva version of 'history' intended for public consumption in which anything can be said, including some quite untenable statements. These we sometimes argue against, but generally ignore.

RJ: So how did you start working on the theory of the Aryan race and communal ideologies in India?

RT: I am going to be a little long and boring on this as, even though I have answered this question so often, it continues to be posed. The supporters of the Hindutva idea of history have made me among others a target of attack because I do not accept their version of the narrative about what in India is referred to as the Aryan question. Many other historians hold the same view as I do, but they are mentioned less often or not at all.

It started with a number of us questioning colonial interpretations of Indian history. The latter took shape tentatively at the end of the eighteenth century, but became axiomatic to the writing of Indian history by colonial historians in the nineteenth century. There were two dominant themes in this history.

One was that India was a static society, that it never changed and that the foundations of Indian civilization were what was called Aryan. The term Aryan was not clearly defined and its meaning moved between two extremes widely discussed with reference to the European past: was it a biological label for a race, or was it a language label for people who spoke the related languages of proto-Indo-European (as reconstructed), Old Iranian, and Indo-Aryan in Asia, and some languages in Europe? That the definition of who is an Aryan has not remained static in history, and changes from time to time according to context, was not investigated. It was also assumed that Aryan and Hindu were virtually interchangeable terms, and that the *Veda*s were foundational to Hinduism. The period of the composition of the Vedic corpus, generally taken as around 1500–600 BC, when what was taken as the Aryan presence was evident given the absence of other texts, was thought of as the utopia of the Indian past.

Some colonial scholarship proposed that the Aryans had invaded India and imposed a superior civilization on the natives. The superiority was the important point. There was in this view a reflection of the theories of race or 'race-science' as it was popularly called in Europe at that time. Some Indian nationalist opinion argued that the Aryans came from as far away as the Arctic, others argued for a closer homeland in Tibet. But among some non-Indian writers, as, for example, the early Theosophists, a few maintained that the Aryans were indigenous to India, had migrated westwards, and thereby exported Indian Aryan culture to civilize the rest of the world. This latter opinion is being invoked anew, but is still seeking appropriate evidence.

The second popular colonial interpretation was the periodization of James Mill where Indian history was divided into Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization, and the British period. The Hindus and the Muslims were said to have been in a state of constant hostility, and Hindus had to thank the British for ending the tyranny of Muslims. Hence the current slogan that Hindus have been slaves for the last one thousand years, first under Muslim rule and presumably then British, and have therefore been victimized.

These were essential aspects of the colonial interpretation. When nationalist historians wrote ancient history, they accepted the notion of Aryan culture as a golden age and did not question the periodization propounded by Mill. Some suggested changing the nomenclature from Hindu–Muslim–British to Ancient–Medieval–Modern, to make it sound less oriented to religion alone, and this was very slowly accepted in most history departments. It was the periodization current in European history. But the change was self-defeating since the reasons for the periodization remained the same as in the previous one. This is also the time when the model of static society was being dismissed, but the alternative readings for early history were not forthcoming, despite the attempts made by some historians to suggest alternative narratives. On the other hand, both Hindu and Muslim religious nationalisms eagerly appropriated the two-nation theory, and rooted their versions of Indian history in colonial interpretations, as they continue to do.

It was and is argued that Pakistan has established an Islamic state. India, it is said, should be a Hindu Rashtra—which was said to be its historical destiny, and would register the successful outcome of Hindu nationalism. The end point of Indian history lay in the creation of a Hindu state. History from the start had moved to this end, despite the glitches of Islamic and British rule. These were political slogans rather than historical explanations, and followed the colonial views of Indian history. Therefore, as historians some of us were deeply concerned that political slogans were taking over from what should have been statements based on seriously investigated history. And this led me to write about some of these issues where they pertained to early history.

My historical investigations were conditioned by two broader questions. One was how do historians assess what is often called the foundations of a civilization? The main question here was whether such foundations can be attributed to only one body of people—if such a body can be identified—or can they be seen as a process that in itself evolves gradually through the interactions of various cultures if circumstances permit. In other words, the negotiations between cultures and their varied contributions have to be recognized as essential to the formulation of what we call a civilization. It is not chiselled out of a single, unitary block, as seems to have been envisaged by the nineteenth-century colonial formulators of the concept of civilization.

On the question of the relations between Hindus and Muslims and of these with others, the historian has to first define the communities that are under discussion: are they castes or are they regional communities with caste divisions, or are they communities that do not function through castes, as in the case of Adivasis and some other groups whom we as historians have tended to neglect. Similarly with the religions—are they monolithic communities, which is unlikely, or are they sects and if so then which particular ones are in dialogue with each other? Furthermore, if the actions of royalty are being discussed then the historian has to investigate their purpose and politics. There is also the necessity of discovering what reactions a particular action had at other levels of society. Historically, it says very little to merely mention Hindu–Muslim harmony or conflict. These statements later tend to become political slogans of our times, rather than historical generalizations about earlier times. Historical investigation requires a far deeper probing of what led to particular policies or situations and their impact on society. This involves a broad-based study of an interdisciplinary nature where the criss-crossing of social, economic, religious, and cultural factors, all have to be considered.

Inevitably, this approach was diametrically opposite to the fantasized past being constructed by Hindu and Muslim religious nationalisms as contained in their slogans, activities, and publications. In India, the focus was directed by a number of religious nationalist organizations. Based on the colonial interpretation of ancient India was the theory about the Aryans. Initially, it was said that there was an invasion by Aryans. Then it was said that the foundations of the Indian civilization were Vedic and, therefore, Aryan, and that the Vedic culture encapsulates the origins of ancient Indian civilization. But in the 1920s the Harappan cities were discovered and excavations began. At first it was conceded that this was a city culture that had no similarities to the Vedic and was, therefore, prior to and separate. It did not fit into the Vedic culture and yet it could not be dismissed. This upset the theory of the foundations of Indian civilization as Aryan. In fact, over the years, more cities were discovered and historians and archaeologists described it as an extensive pre-Vedic civilization. Those that wanted to go back to Aryan origins are now arguing that the Harappans were also Aryans and their cities were part of the Vedic culture. For them, the Harappans have been brought into the fold of the Aryan, whereas many historians and archaeologists reject the idea of the Harappans being Aryans. The latter are, therefore, accused of being ignorant of the Vedic texts and in any case, they are Marxists! So what would they know about Indian history? The equation of Harappan with Aryan becomes necessary if it is argued that the Aryans founded Indian civilization and were indigenous to India, and, as a corollary, that they had gone out from India to civilize the world. This view conforms to one of the colonial theories of the nineteenth century about the origin of the Aryans in India and their contribution to world civilization.

The Aryans are projected as a special, superior people—racially, ethnically distinct. And despite the fact that the idea of Aryan as a race was discarded almost a century ago, it is still spoken of as a race in popular Indian perception, as are also various ethnic and linguistic groups. Perhaps it is worth keeping in mind that discussions of Aryan superiority in Europe in the 1930s were familiar to those in India who were focusing on the origins and identity of the Hindu in India. Leaders of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) knew and admired Benito Mussolini and regarded the Italian fascist organization as a role model for their own organization and activities.

Many historians, philologists, and linguists have been arguing that the concept of the *arya* in the texts is not a biological concept of race, or even of ethnicity, but refers to a cultural concept, namely, the speakers of a particular language. This would suggest that the term Aryan is an abbreviation for 'the Aryan-speaking people'. Once there is a shift from biology to language, the question becomes a cultural issue. Modern linguists have posited elements of Dravidian in the Vedic texts. So it has to be explained where these elements came from. Were there Dravidian speakers in areas inhabited by Aryan speakers? What was their origin? Was there perhaps bilingualism among them? What was the process by which Indo-Aryan became a dominant language? This opens up the discussion to questions such as who is speaking which language? What is the nature of the interaction between the speakers of the languages? What information can we get from the vocabulary of the languages?

The claim continues that if the Aryans were indigenous their culture has to go back to the earliest beginnings. The attempt now is to take it back to at least 7500 BC so that the Harappan culture and other early cultures can also be automatically included. It has to be said of the Aryans that their language was Sanskrit, their religion was Hinduism, and they took their civilization across the borders to the West and civilized the world. The evidence so far contradicts these theories. Where do Dravidian and Munda speakers fit into this scheme, and how is the absence of urban culture in the Vedic corpus to be explained? Other such contradictions are just ignored. Since keeping up with research is not at a premium among the majority that hold these views, all kinds of invented statements are attributed to various authorities, with a Goebbels-like insistence that if a fabrication is repeated often enough it will be taken as the truth.

I am invariably targeted and accused of saying that there was an Aryan invasion of India. Yet I was among the earlier Indian historians to discuss at length, in my presidential address to the Ancient History section of the Indian History Congress held at Varanasi in 1969, that the theory of an Aryan invasion of India cannot be sustained as the evidence does not support it. I argued that there was no invasion, but that there was perhaps a series of small-scale migrations of a leapfrogging variety. This meant that a small group settled in the north-west, possibly evolved a mixed culture of the migrant and the local *dasa* culture; then from this there would be another migration further towards the Ganges plain and this pattern would continue for a while. This might explain how the Vedic corpus registers the incorporation of elements of change evident from the earlier to the later texts and the shift in location eastwards and southwards. But curiously, there is among our critics no recognition of the fundamental difference between invasion and migration as social and cultural processes, or of the kinds of cultural negotiations that take place as societies evolve in the context of either of the two.

The form of the attack on some of us has been curious. In my case it started with a criticism of the two textbooks I had written for schools. It then went on to criticize views attributed to me, collected by hearsay, and not by quoting any of my writing, and finally to making abusive remarks about me in general—

more recently, ranging from the accusation that I was deluding students at JNU because I was utterly incompetent in the study of ancient Indian history, to which was added the suspicion that I had converted to Christianity, and extending to the most disgusting and obscene abuse.

To return to the textbooks. In the mid-1960s, I had written two textbooks for middle schools—*Ancient India* and *Medieval India*—published by the NCERT to be used in state schools under the central government. These were criticized by members of the Arya Samaj and other similar organizations because I had mentioned that eating beef was not prohibited in the ancient Aryan culture. But a more serious attack came from the Morarji Desai government in 1977, when it was argued that the textbooks written for the NCERT by other historians and myself should be banned as they were anti-Hindu and, therefore, anti-Indian and anti-national. The high school textbooks written by other historians—R.S. Sharma, Satish Chandra, and Bipan Chandra—were also heavily criticized at this time for the same reasons. There was a debate in the print media that later took on a wider dimension with the debate on the Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi. However, we survived the attacks and the books continued in use, possibly because the government fell soon after. Subsequently, the BJP came to power from 1999 to 2004 and took up the issue again. This witnessed the entry of large numbers of what are now called 'the trolls' into this debate on the Internet. They indulged in the most vicious abuse against us, whilst ministers of the government accused us of being academic terrorists writing anti-Indian history, and proclaimed this in parliament. Fresh textbooks were written by historians sympathetic to their views on history. But this government fell in 2004 so the textbooks were again open to being rewritten. This was done and the new textbooks of 2005–6 were prescribed. But now that the BJP is back in power, their supporters are demanding that textbooks again be rewritten.

Some of us thought it was a ridiculous situation that each time the government changes, the textbooks in state schools have to change as well. So we protested in 2005 and wrote in the press and to the ministries concerned, arguing that institutions such as the NCERT, the Councils of Research in History, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences, the Akademies, and such like should be made into autonomous bodies and should be run by the professionals concerned, with no control by the government. The demand fell on deaf ears and after a few attempts we gave up. I now realize that we should have persisted more vehemently.

So our contestation goes back to the 1970s. Initially, there were deliberate attempts by these groups to tarnish all those historians who had questioned the colonial interpretations on which their own so-called 'histories' were based. Those aspects of nationalist history that had continued with certain colonial readings, such as the two themes I have just mentioned, had been questioned. Gradually, the attack focused more on a few historians of ancient India, but more recently I seem to have emerged as the villain of the piece leading a pack of wolves!

In 2003, the opposition to me swelled up in a petition originating with some NRI (non-resident Indian) groups in the USA objecting to my appointment to a visiting chair at the Library of Congress and demanded that my appointment be reversed. This was the counterpart to the haranguing by the BJP government in India. A lengthy document of many pages set out my utter inadequacy for the position, followed by about a couple of thousand signatures supporting the demand in rather objectionable language. For me the high point of this petition was not only that it was dismissed with a wave of the hand by the Librarian of Congress, who was the administrative head, but as a friend pointed out to me, that among the list of signatories, my name had also been included as objecting to my appointment! But the incident became the nucleus of a valuable seminar organized by the Library of Congress on the control over textbooks in various countries. Not only was the demand for my removal politely but firmly rejected, but five years later I was awarded the Kluge Prize for lifetime achievement. The prize is ranked as the equivalent of the Nobel in disciplines not covered by the Nobel Prize. I shared it with Peter Brown, a historian I much admire. This must undoubtedly have rankled with those who had listed my inadequacies for the visiting chair. The targeting continues through email and public pronouncements denouncing my work.

A denunciation of the kind that was put out in the petition can only have come from people lacking in self-confidence and suffering from an insecure identity. Was it again the much-repeated story of migrants in an alien host culture, materially successful, but not integrated into the host culture, and furthermore guilty about having deserted the motherland, and, therefore, trying to make amends by insisting on upholding its past glories. I also suspect that behind the mockery of its academic facade, a key factor of the attack is that I am a woman, and in their kind of mindset women and Dalits should not be permitted even to study, leave alone to question or analyse the texts that they still regard as ancient Hindu religious texts. The Manu *Dharmashastra* is firm on this and its views seem to continue in some circles.

I have not had the opportunity so far to read about the construction of other anti-colonial nationalisms, but have wondered whether other ex-colonies, now independent states, in other parts of the world have had a similar experience in postcolonial times. Does it happen that in nations such as ours, identity politics of extremist religious nationalism also draw on the colonial construction of their society to legitimize their ideologies? Colonial views are reinstated often as part of right-wing ideologies that are in turn frequently derived from colonial readings and practices. These then are proclaimed as the indigenous history of the nation untouched by the cultural pollution of Western ideas, and yet the theories so propounded are rooted in colonial interpretations of the past. In the Indian case, since religious extremism in politics was not part of the anti-colonial nationalism, colonial readings are often reiterated in the ideologies of Hindu and other communal nationalists.

The origins of the Aryans have never been a subject central to my research as my interest has been much more on the Mauryan period and later centuries. My limited interest in 'the Aryan question' has been more in terms of the institutions of that time and how they changed in the subsequent period. This should be apparent from a couple of my books that in part discuss the subject. But for some weird reason the origin of the Aryans is what invariably lands on my doorstep as a major criticism of my history. This may be because I am more interested in the social and cultural institutions that emerged and on which I did some interdisciplinary reading. Such reading is perhaps unfamiliar to those still obsessed with proving that the Aryans were indigenous.

I should add that I am interested in topics such as the decipherment of the Indus script, although I hasten to say that I have never attempted it. But conversations with Asko Parpola and long and incisive discussions with Iravatham Mahadevan continue on every occasion when we meet, and these have now been going on for almost fifty years! Mahadevan is that rare non-professional Indologist who knows more about this topic than most professionals.

The Role of Archaeology and Anthropology

RJ: How much were you in that period influenced by social anthropology and archaeology?

RT: Archaeology, yes, directly. As I was saying earlier, I took time off and spent three seasons working in an excavation at Kalibangan in order to understand archaeological reports better and this experience helped enormously. I was determined to understand archaeology because this was then the new source of evidence. Texts had been examined quite thoroughly, but other sources were awaiting new questions. So I was very interested in archaeology as an additional source of information. As one moved into historical periods, the information from archaeology could be juxtaposed with that from texts. Such information could act as a corrective as, for example, in the excavation of Mauryan period sites. The nature of the settlement at Bhir Mound (near Taxila) or of Shishupalgarh in Odisha gives one a rather different picture of urbanization in Mauryan times than the one we assume from textual sources, while the excavations at Patna seem to conform more closely to the textual description of Pataliputra.

Unfortunately, archaeology in India it still being used largely only for getting more information. There are fewer attempts at reconstructing society and economy from archaeological data alone and then comparing it with the texts; or for that matter closely correlating the two categories of sources, although admittedly the problem of their chronology would come in the way; or to ask new kinds of questions best answered by assessments of ecology and natural resources; or to examine the production of commodities for consumption or exchange. This, of course, requires a much greater emphasis on fieldwork and excavation and new ways of assessing the evidence than is presently the case.

Other than archaeology, the social science that is close to early history is social anthropology. It deals with understanding the functioning of a range of societies from the simplest to the more complex. The difference between an agro-pastoral society and an agrarian or urban settlement, and why they cannot be treated as identical becomes clear. This understanding could be used as the starting point in examining a text and the society it describes. Being interested in this I began to read some social anthropology because societies of early times were very different from ours, and historians have to understand this difference. So my reading focused on various forms of premodern societies and how they functioned. Even if some exist in present times as among what we called Scheduled Tribes in India, Adivasis, they differ from modern society. I was looking for patterns that might have similarities with the picture that emerges of society in early history, and from archaeology. I was also interested in the kinds of questions that anthropologists asked and whether these might assist us historians to ask similar questions of our data or to formulate the questions, where such questions were relevant.

For instance, there is a link between forms of kinship and sociopolitical forms of social organization. The fact of having a genealogy and someone to record it, was a mark of status to begin with. Genealogies are essential to claims of caste status in terms of endogamy and exogamy—as in *jatis*—and in clan society, in knowing whom you can marry and whom you cannot according to caste rules and in observing social codes. So how did these rules come about and why are they observed? Genealogies also have patterns that relate to social forms. This enabled me to look at the *Mahabharata* as reflecting norms of social organization. Where these norms no longer hold, the historian has to ask the question, 'Why'? Why do the Pandavas observe entirely different forms of marital relations over three consecutive generations, namely, bride price between Pandu and Madri, fraternal polyandry of Draupadi marrying five brothers, and cross-cousin marriage when Arjun abducts Subhadra.

The genealogies of the *Ramayana* follow a different pattern from those in the *Mahabharata*. In terms of social history, the answer to this question tells us much about these societies. So history is no longer concerned only with the historicity of the events of the *Mahabharata* or their precise dating, a subject that obsessed historians a century ago, but far less so now. In present times, the texts are combed to try and discover who these people were, how they lived, what were the social laws they observed, and if possible the manner in which they thought about concepts that were important to them.

I also read a fair amount on the anthropology and sociology of religion because I realized increasingly that our ideas about the history of religion were still too closely tied only to the literal reading of religious texts and influenced by our modern understanding of religion and its role in society. Together with this we took the shape of Indian religions as worked out in the nineteenth century as true to form and we believed the same patterns existed in earlier times. Nor was there a sufficient study of the social institutions that religions create, or what has been called 'religious enterprise' and its organization. What was the social and ideological role of the Brahmanical *ashrama*s and *matha*s, or of the Buddhist and Jaina *vihara*s (monasteries)?

NB: This raises a larger question about the relationship between history and other disciplines. We know that interdisciplinarity is a desirable ideal. We need to learn from other disciplines—from their insights and methods. This relationship often poses a problem. The question is: how do we relate to and draw upon other disciplines? When we, as historians, look at other disciplines and borrow from them, many of the defining categories with which we operate get structured by the assumptions of the disciplines we draw upon. And the conceptual problems of that discipline then become our problems too. For instance, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch's idea about premodern society was framed by Levy-Bruhl and others' idea of the primitive.... I mean the simple binary between the primitive and the civilized that was prevalent within anthropology. Could one say, for instance, your own work is strongly influenced by your deep reading of anthropology? And if it has, then have you faced any problem in relating to the discipline? Have you had to struggle with the problematic assumptions of the anthropology that you draw upon?

RT: To some extent and for some themes, yes. My reading of some social anthropology has however helped me pose a few questions to the texts. In fact, some historians have described my work as more anthropology than history, which I suppose is a way of setting it aside, whereas research students and others have found it quite useful. However, the speculation that may result is controlled by the fact that my data consists of ancient texts and I can only go so far and no further in deriving answers from them. Anthropologists study functioning societies and to that extent can field a wider range of questions.

NB: Many of the French anthropologists you refer to operate with evolutionist frames, which has been one of the criticisms which Adam Cooper and others have been making. They tend to frame societal change in terms of a transition from kinship to state, from blood to territory. And, in some way, this idea of transition frames some of your writings ... you deploy it most effectively in your book *From Lineage to State*. Could one say that the evolutionism underlying the arguments of the French Marxist anthropologists also structures your thinking? What would you say is the way we can critically engage with other disciplines? What are the problems you see in using other disciplines?

RT: Evolutionism, for example, was a notion that existed long before the French anthropologists discussed it. It was implied in the question, 'Why are you studying history?' to which the answer usually was, 'I am studying history in order to understand the evolution of my society'. But as you know, in the last few decades there has been a debate on using social evolution as the pattern in explanations. Some of us still support the idea although perhaps in a general sense, if we see some notional teleology although it need not be identical in all societies.

On the question of how one relates to these disciplines, let me try and clarify this by giving you an example. When I was working on the *dana-stuti* hymns of the *Rig Veda*, which were the hymns in praise of the chiefs returning from a successful raid, and the munificent gifts given to the poet who had composed the hymn; or on the *Mahabharata* where there is a description of the *rajasuya* sacrifice performed by Yudhisthira, when his allies and friends came bearing gifts, of which there is a list of who brought what gift. I was reading these texts, and carefully noting the names and the numbers, and types of gifts, and so on. And then I read Marcel Mauss's famous study *The Gift* and I thought to myself, 'The gift is not just "X" giving an object to "Y", as there are all kinds of other relationships that underlie this act of giving'. For me, it was a revelation. I went back to my texts and I started looking for these other relationships. Status, chiefship, kingship, ritual, kin relations, economic exchanges, all this came pouring out. I realized that out of this one simple activity that I was recording as a historian, I was missing out on the essential adjacent, adjoining, complementary activities that were of equal importance, but perhaps not obvious on the face of it, at least not to those that were not analysing the system of exchange, but participating in it.

It was hard at first to explain to students what the implications were of gift exchange. But when I asked them whether they had heard their parents discussing how much should be spent on a wedding gift—calculating it in terms of how close was the relationship to the recipient, or what had been the value of the gift that might have been received on an earlier occasion had there been a gift to a person getting married—many faces lit up recognizing the idea and recalling the issues discussed.

The point that we have got to in history, as far as Indian history is concerned, is that we familiarize ourselves with other disciplines, we try and understand the questions that other people in other disciplines are asking. What we haven't started asking is, 'If I ask those questions of my data, and my data is sometimes similar to the anthropological data, and I get a different answer, does the anthropologist listen to my answer and include it in his question to his data?'

So historians in India, and at least those working on ancient history, are still largely at the stage of searching for, finding, accepting, rejecting, questions from other disciplines. But we haven't got to the point of saying, 'I get different answers. Do you have an explanation for those different answers?'

Blood, Kinship, and Lineage

NB: I think that's a great way of framing the issue, but could we pursue this question a bit more? This evolutionism in many ways also tends to frame the transition narratives in the histories of modes of production and social formation. There is often an assumption that each stage is defined by a dominant characteristic, a central ordering principle, and there is a linear move from one stage to another. In evolutionist anthropology, we move from societies organized around kinship to those founded on territory, and then to those where the institution of the state becomes important. In the theories of transition in modes of production, again we have a similar move from slave society to feudalism, to capitalism, and finally to socialism. The focus on unilinear change and the search for the new organizing principle of the evolving society lead too often to the valorization of what is new, and an assumption that there is a linear displacement of the old. We do not see how many of the elements of the old are reworked, refigured, and become constituent elements of what is seen as the new order. Lineage and kinship may continue to be critically important in the working of many state societies, bonded and forced labour seen within the old theories of transition as precapitalist, may in fact be crucial to the operation of capitalist economies. Inevitably then, in these evolutionist transition theories some histories are marginalized, and social groups associated with earlier forms of society are not seen as important in the new social formation. They are written out of history.

So the question is: what happens to our metanarrative of transition when you bring all these people and social groups into our story, and begin to write about them. The metanarrative inevitably gets a bit messed up.... We can no longer have neat schemas.

RT: It needn't get messed up. Partly because what one is ordering in history is selective. You cannot hope to write a history of India in which every single social type, let alone every single society, is somehow fitted in, at least into the overall pattern. We have to accept deficiencies in our explanations and understandings of the past. That is why there are debates between those that hold variant views. Why do we have problems today between upper castes and Dalits? Between Hindus and Muslims? In part, these grow out of the problems of current social and economic inequalities and injustices, but in part the confrontations are the creations of how we have read our history, by the identities that we have assumed on the basis of that reading, and by how easily all this can be exploited by political parties out to control society. Some are trying to question these readings in the hope of clarifying our inheritance, others are staying with the present and not moving at all, and still others are endorsing other readings and moving in another direction that may well prove to be destructive. These are matters of discussion and we seem not to concede that knowledge should move through such discussion.

So either one tends to write a kind of potted history, in which one jumps from community to community and society to society, which really doesn't make too much sense, or else one is selective. The difference, I think, between a good historian and a bad historian is that the good historian makes it clear why and how the selections have been made.

If you make that clear, and you admit you're not writing absolutely everybody's history and bringing everybody in, then I think it's reasonable. Then I think that kind of history is acceptable. And the reader knows that this is in some ways a limited history. But the limits are limits that may not be overcome where the information that we have at the moment is insufficient.

The second thing I want to say is that very often, as in the example of lineage, it is true that notions of lineage and kinship are very important, and they continue to be, albeit in a changed form. What I mean by this is that in caste society, marriages are arranged observing rules of endogamy and exogamy. The fundamental factor is the lineage that is central to *jati*. You can marry into this group, and you can't marry into that group. Now, we don't call it the continuation of lineage, we call it by the umbrella term 'caste', that can refer to *varna/jati*, as well as occupation. But in fact at one level it's a continuation of lineage. It's been turned around to support another social system, but the essential underlying factor remains similar.

Now, this can happen or it need not happen. And it is for us as historians to recognize points of change. When does a society continue to hold to lineage as in the *Mahabharata*, although as I pointed out there are some deviations? Or when does it become a society that holds to caste, as in the Manu *Dharmashastra*, where lineage continues to be important, but it's something else that's being talked about? Because there are other extraneous factors that have been added as crucial factors.

NB: I agree with the way you're framing this discussion about the selectivity of facts, and how obviously you can't incorporate everything into your narrative. The historian needs to make clear what is incorporated, and what are the criteria of selectivity.

But there are times—both to do with the discussion of lineage in your case, but also more generally—when one feels that the structure of a narrative itself excludes the possibility of certain things being seen as important. It is not a question of lack of information. The frame defines what we see and discover as meaningful within the sources we read. It lights up some things and occludes and 'invisibilizes' others. Traces of the past remain buried in the records, untapped, unexplored, till one begins to mine the same records through a different frame, ask different questions. The transition narrative from feudalism to capitalism, in a sense, created that kind of problem. This not only led to a whole series of conceptual difficulties within the transition debates, it also blocked the possible exploration of things that did not make sense within the terms of the debate at the time.

Now, in the lineage to state narrative, what seems to happen is this. Once one frames the argument within that transition narrative, and we search for the historical origins of the state, we tend to overlook the continued importance of kinship and lineage—seen as the basis of pre-state societies—within the working of state societies. In a certain sense, that gets left out of our story, because the metanarrative is one which is looking at the progressive dimensions – urbanization, expansion of settled agriculture, emergence of state, etc. In tracking this linear transition, we undervalue the significance of those elements that we see as the characteristics of past formations. Or else we see them as residues, hang overs, survivals within evolving structures. As if they are bound to disappear with the linear unfolding of the metanarrative of transition.

In tracking the historical transition to agrarian capitalism in modern India, for instance, for a long while we forgot the significance of pastoral economies, forest societies, food gathering, foraging, etc., within the frame of the modern. As if the histories of those who were involved with these societal forms did not matter. We rediscovered their significance only in the 1980s to the 1990s. It is with the turn to environmental histories and the focus on 'marginals' that we began to recover the histories of the forest dwellers, the tribals, the pastoralists.... But the point is to see how this in turn reworks our metanarrative, forces us to rethink the entire frame of transition histories. We need to see how differing social forms are intimately and symbiotically connected within the unfolding of the modern. This is something we still need to work out.

RT: Yes, you are right, we have tended to ignore those societies that don't fit into our basic narrative. And we need to see how we can correct that. But, at the same time, I would say that one of the things that historians have perhaps not succeeded in doing is showing the metamorphosis of an older mode of functioning into later forms. It need not even be a series of debates going back in time, and seeing how a society changed from one form to another, rather like the old transition debates, but instead seeing periods of time from a different perspective and observing social change from this. I think it would be revelatory to write about various Islamic communities that evolved in different parts of the subcontinent, from the perspective of how they conformed to lineage, language, and caste, and what customary law they absorbed and internalized from the localities where they settled. What was their attitude to the *sharia* and to what is said to be the social codes of Islamic societies. Up to what point are these observed? Why are they so different from each other? Arab traders settled in Gujarat and Kerala and a number of other places established communities and religious sects, frequently amalgamating the formal religion with local practice. Why do the communities that emerged from these settlements, such as the Bohras and Mapillas, have distinctly different patterns of life? Until recently, local culture seems to have predominated in giving an identity to the community. Historians need to do more research on such subjects going back in time: they are fundamental to our understanding of social history even of earlier periods. It would change the way one looks at the history of India.

History and Political Ideologies

RJ: Do you think there are ideological reasons?

RT: Yes, there are ideological reasons. People keep repeating, 'Islam never had any caste'. But it creeps into conversations as, for example, about grandparental generations and their marriages. Why don't we talk about it? Is it because the orthodox Muslim would say that there's no such thing as caste in Islam? And the orthodox Hindu will say that caste is the badge of the Hindu, and distance himself from those who do not observe the *varna–ashrama–dharma* (form of caste society) and who, therefore, can be called *mleccha*, different or inferior, even if they happen to be the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate.

Or, for that matter, how many Hindus actually did observe the social codes of the *varna–ashrama–dharma*, or was it largely observed in theory or to enhance a political opportunity? But beyond the orthodoxy and the socially superior groups, the situation was different. It would be salutary for us to see what the different layers of society actually were and how they related to each other. There were social appropriations at various levels and there were sects of mixed religious belief and practice. There was likely to be less antagonism at lower levels than among the elites where political rivalry was rife. Those who converted to Islam or Christianity often retained their social rank and structure that drew on caste. To this day, one meets Catholics in Goa who at some point in the conversation will mention in passing that they are *brahmana* Catholics, or Muslims in Uttar Pradesh who will mention that they retain Yadav in their name. They may have converted, but they retain their earlier caste status. And, of course, as I have said before, the existence of the Dalit groups continues irrespective of conversion to any religion.

I'm going off on a tangent here, but the social historian, sociologist, and social anthropologist have yet to get together in order to understand the working and reworking of social institutions in the course of Indian history.

RJ: There is another form of cross-exchange which exists not just between academic disciplines, but between one discipline, like history and politics. This brings us back to your work on communalism and ancient Indian history. Was it because of your political status as a centre-leftist intellectual in Indian society that you decided to emphasize more on the idea of false national pride coming from Aryanism?

RT: I was opposed to the political ideologues who, insisting that their version of history was correct, were preventing discussion of other versions, in the attempt to discredit the writing of a secular history, which is what I was most interested in. By secular I mean the version that does not exclude religion, but sees religion both as a belief system and also as a system controlling social institutions—education, marriage, occupation, inheritance, and patronage. My opposition focused on the two themes that were central to the Hindutva view of history based on colonial interpretations. I agreed with those who argued that Indian history cannot be explained by recourse to hinging everything on the religion of the ruler and positing a glorious Hindu period followed by a period characterized by the tyrannical rule of Muslim kings, which led to Hindus and Muslims being constantly in conflict.

Glorious moments in the past can occur at any time depending on the definition of such moments. Dynasties as entities cannot be described as benign or tyrannical since the policies of their rulers vary. Apart from the political outcome of this kind of history, even in terms of the discipline, it reduced history to a single explanation of Muslim rule as responsible for all negative aspects of the period, with generalizations that lacked supportive evidence. If today the world and his wife believe that they can hold forth on history without resort to evidence, it is because the propagation of such historical statements as are being popularized frequently, ignore the requirement of evidence assessed methodically, and of causality drawing on logic. The absence of evidence is one factor, but the other important factor is that history cannot be interpreted only by referring to the religion of the dynasties. The rest of society is left out. Generalizations about the elite in a society refer only to a fraction of society, as they are generally inapplicable to the rest of society.

The Aryan question, Aryanism, and the highlighting of Aryan origins is, as I wrote many years ago, something of a red herring. There are other more significant themes that have to be researched, such as the evolution and mutation of cultures at that time. Whatever constituted the foundation of a civilization has to be analysed, prised open, and viewed from a variety of perspectives in order to understand it. Cultural foundations are not blocks of stone cemented into the past and not to be disturbed. They are created out of processes of change and these have to be recognized. The question is not necessarily of who founded the civilization, but, given the simultaneous existence of other languages not connected to Indo-Aryan, one significant question relates to how Indo-Aryan became prominent in many parts of the subcontinent. Was it a period of cultural amalgamation between *arya*s, *dasa*s, and *mleccha*s, not speaking the same language and characterized by different cultural patterns, or were the categories kept distinct? The cultural cartography of those times can only be mapped by taking evidence from a variety of disciplines and not being dependent on only one source. For example, deciphering the language of the Harappans could possibly lead to a rather different story. This kind of thinking may be unacceptable to the politics of a particular ideology, but professional historians may have other views. All explanations have to be assessed in terms of the evidence they draw upon and their historical viability.

At the popular level, history is often presented as a bunch of slogans. There is little recognition that it requires specialized training such as palaeography and linguistics for instance, to handle some crucial sources, and a method of critical inquiry to understand them. The parallel that is not applied is that of not everyone being able to pronounce on the findings of physics without being trained to understand the data; so similarly not anyone and everyone can pronounce on history without being trained. That history as a social science is no longer just a string of information put together as a story, has not been understood by those claiming to write history, but without the training to do so.

In saying this I am not trying to be arrogant about the discipline of history. There was a time when history was just a narrative of what happened in the past. Today we ask complex questions about that past and the handling of these questions requires training. Each book I write is based on a new set of questions and new ideas which may well require familiarity with yet another kind of study or another kind of history. Now that historians are recognizing the interface of cultures and what goes into their making, comparative history is often required. The historian hesitates to pronounce authoritatively on a subject in which she has not done some specialist work. I get riled when people say that history is just a matter of knowing a few facts and stringing them together into a story. History is a discipline that involves the intellect and involves wide reading and thinking. Those who don't appreciate this, resort not to debate, but to abusing those they disagree with.

RJ: This confusion between language and race is also pointed to by people like Max Müller....

RT: Max Müller, although well aware of the difference, did on occasion confuse the two when writing about India.

RJ: ... Who makes a theory of race. This has been taken up by a number of scholars in Europe between the two wars, and was intensified. I want to know, how much you were sensitive towards the fact that the outcomes of this confusion within the European context was actually fascism.

RT: Yes, many of us historians and other social scientists were sensitive to the implications and the outcomes. The initial propagators of Hindutva were also familiar with the European fascists, such as Mussolini and the Italian Fascisti in the 1930s, whom they admired.

RJ: I'm sure that without mentioning Europe, you were aware of the parallels.

RT: We were and are certainly aware of the parallels, and aware of the fact that if one were to push the argument about racial purity or the racial contribution to a culture, and not debate this and the other dimensions of the contribution, it would lead to a similar fascist ideology as that of Europe in the 1930s apart from being historically invalid. One did point to what had happened in Europe, and more so to the fact that theories of race, questionable in themselves, cannot explain events.

As a historian one might argue that this could end up being either a footnote to the central issue, or could become the issue itself. But it would be difficult to argue today that the civilization of India derives from just one group of people speaking a particular language and adhering to a particular pattern of life and observing a particular religion. That would be shutting out other equally significant contributors. It would be an extreme example of selectivity in history. Cultures, even where they are dominant cultures, are nearly always mixed. The archaeological picture of the second and first millennium BC does not suggest a uniform culture. The different patterns of living in the late Harappan cultures, the Black and Red Ware cultures, the Painted Grey Ware culture, and the Megalithic cultures are apparent. Migrations even within the subcontinent were extensive, such as Videgha Mathava and his band travelling eastwards from the Doab into the middle Ganga plain, and clearing the marshes to settle there as described in the Vedic corpus. But if the claim is that all these cultures come from the same source, then that bypasses many awkward but essential questions.

That the Aryans were indigenous is axiomatic to the supporters of the Hindutva theory. But, of course, this theory and that of their being the earliest inhabitants of India is not an indigenous theory of Indian origin. It is again part of the colonial interpretation of the beginnings of Indian history. It was propagated by a theosophist, Colonel Olcott, who in 1875 maintained that the Aryans were indigenous to India and took Aryan civilization from India to the West. Madame Blavatsky, who was central to the setting up of the Theosophical Society, also propagated these ideas. The Theosophists worked very closely with the Arya Samaj in northern India before they had a falling out. The theory of the Aryans and the Vedic sources as the foundation of Indian civilization came from Max Müller and from colonial scholars, and was popularized by various groups, Indians and others. The racial aspect that also attracted the attention of Indian opinion is the theory that perhaps the British and the Indians were of the same race, and therefore described as parted cousins! The word *arya* in the early sources does not have a racial or biological connotation. It refers to people who are respected, speak a particular language, and observe certain customs and beliefs. The term continues to be used for a range of such people. It is also a term of respect, used for royalty as well as for Buddhist monks, irrespective of their social origins.

The easy political use of the theory apart, the serious investigation of the subject has become complex. It now requires coordinating multiple categories of evidence from the humanities and the sciences. Let me try and summarize the complexities. A person knowing classical Sanskrit is not as well qualified to analyse the Vedic corpus as one who has specialized in Vedic Sanskrit. Expertise in Vedic linguistics is now essential, and linguistics as a discipline is different from just knowing a language. As my colleague K. Meenakshi, who had specialized in both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian linguistics, informed me, that analysis of Vedic texts on the basis of linguistics showed that there were elements of Dravidian in the *Rig Veda*. This points to the juxtaposition of two distinct language groups. This becomes an important aspect of cultural history. It also helps if there is some expertise in cognate languages such as Old Iranian and adjacent languages such as Dravidian.

The archaeology of the period now has links with sites in neighbouring areas and the study of the nature of the settlements becomes more complex. Not everyone is agreed that the archaeology of the Harappan cities, demonstrating a sophisticated urban pattern of life with citadels constructed on mounds, is the same as the far simpler agro-pastoralism of the Vedic texts unfamiliar with urban cultures. The Harappans were trading communities spread over a vast area stretching from the Pamirs to Oman and from the Doab to Balochistan. Harappan contacts went westwards to Mesopotamia. Rig Vedic geography covers only a small part of this area and is consolidated towards the north-west of the subcontinent, with a later extension into the Ganga plain. The geographical orientation is in two different directions.

Geographical correlations between sources are complicated by much change in river courses in south Panjab and the Upper Doab, as some disappeared while others changed course. Hydrological studies are required to find explanations for these changes. There has also been much controversy on dating the arrival of the horse in India. Were the sparse bones found at a few Harappan sites those of the horse or its predecessor, the onager? Do they justify describing the Harappans as a horse-using culture as were the people of the *Veda*s, among whom horses were plentiful and were both utility and ritual animals?

The latest entrant into the discussion about the origins of the peoples involved is the evidence claimed through DNA analyses. This requires yet another entirely different field of investigation and expertise. The application of genetics as a form of investigation has potential, but is also problematic. It largely hinges on the reliability of genetic data from sources that have been buried and possibly contaminated over centuries. Many DNA readings have emerged in the last couple of decades, but virtually all of them have subsequently been contradicted. The current discussion is on a paper published in 2013 arguing that there was an ancestral northern group genetically similar to groups outside India, and another southern group that was genetically unique; and that around 2000 BC there was an admixture of the two. This would support the theory that new peoples and cultures were trickling in just prior to and after the decline of the Harappan cities. Like all new technologies for acquiring knowledge, the technique itself probably needs more application and verification before we arrive at historical generalizations. Possibly, if different questions were put to the data, not stemming from existing notions of Aryans and non-Aryans, there would be more information forthcoming. It is unlikely that DNA analyses will tell us whether the 'Aryans' were indigenous or alien, assuming that we know precisely what we mean by all three terms. The entry of DNA is, of course, worldwide in many fields of excavated material and is being referred to in many places, but generally not as yet with absolute certainty. It could substantially change some of the questions that we pose to the sources of the ancient past.

RJ: It would be interesting to compare the reference to Aryanism in contemporary India with contemporary Iran, where you have racial and nationalistic standpoints, which take a very fascist turn in the period of Reza Shah. You can even find a political proximity between Nazi Germany and Reza Shah's Iran.

RT: What is interesting is that in the Achaemenid inscriptions, for example, where Darius says, 'I am Darius, king of kings, and I am Aryan', the concept is cultural and not racial. This is further endorsed in an inscription stating that it is written in Aryan, referring to the language. The same usage of Aryan as a language occurs in a central Asian inscription. To the best of my knowledge, the Achaemenids have not as yet been netted into the category of Aryans from India travelling west to spread Aryan civilization! Interestingly, it was the great Aryan Cyrus, the Achaemenid king, who, when he conquered Babylon, freed the Jews, and is referred to as a Messiah. Identities are truly problematic.

The Ideas of Hinduism as Part of Social Functions

NB: I'd like you to talk a bit about the way you saw the political need to engage with certain types of ideas about Hinduism. As far as I can see, there are two or three concerns within your writing over the years. One, at a general level you have continuously questioned the essentialized interpretations of texts, and the representation of one version as the authoritative version. You sought to look at the many texts that constitute a tradition.

Second, you have critiqued the idea of homogeneity and unity within Hinduism ... questioned essentialized interpretations, pointed to the inner conflicts within Hinduism, the polymorphous structure of Hinduism, the variety of voices which have historically jostled for space. You have critiqued the representation of Hinduism as tolerant and non-violent—a representation that represses the histories of violence within the structure of Hinduism.

Third, you have consistently underlined the distinction between Hinduism as a religion and Hindutva as a political ideology ... showing how Hindutva produces a syndicated religion, projecting its view of Hinduism as the authoritative one, the only acceptable one.

What I would like to ask is, 'How did these different interests and concerns develop over time? What was your earliest kind of critique? What was your political concern in battling with these ideas and engaging with Hinduism as a construct?'

RT: It's difficult to pinpoint the earliest critique—or more correctly I should not say critique since it wasn't a critique as such, but my difference with some prevalent ideas of defining Hinduism. I think it really began, though not very consciously, when I was writing my thesis on Ashoka. I read the monastic chronicles from Sri Lanka, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, recording the history of the Theravada sect of early Buddhism and written around the mid-first millennium AD. The Buddha's activities were located in the middle Ganga plain so this history had to be recounted. Additionally, the Buddhist chronicles maintain that the son of Ashoka Maurya was the person who brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. The chronicles, therefore, provide a long description of the Mauryas, focusing on Ashoka because he was seen as the great patron of early Buddhism. In the course of studying these texts, I recognized their underlying historical consciousness even if they were not always factually accurate and, more than that, how political they were in terms of projecting the relationship between the Buddhist Sangha epitomized in the great monastery, the Mahavihara, and the Sinhalese rulers, through narrative looking back to almost a millennium. Such narratives cannot, of course, be taken literally. There was not only much mythologizing (as the three occasions when the Buddha flew to Sri Lanka), but one has to consider what the purpose might have been in writing the narratives in the way they were written.

I then began to see how religious texts have also to be analysed in terms of the kind of analysis that I was doing for other texts. 'Who is the author? Who is the audience? What is the intention? Who is the patron? What is the message?' This starting point was common to my understanding of all the texts that I used in the study of Ashoka, and has stayed with me since. When I started looking at other texts, whether of other religions or non-religious, I asked the same questions.

And then this tied in a little with what we were speaking about earlier: that at the time when discussions of 'the literary turn' were in the air and being written about by historians, and the link to theories of explanation were suggesting new questions, all this encouraged an additional way of questioning texts to what had been asked earlier. One asked questions not only from literary texts, or political texts, but also from religious texts, and more so if one was a historian. We were searching for insights into the texts and were willing to approach them from various perspectives. But let me add that I did not endorse Postmodernism. In fact, I remained an old-fashioned empirical positivist as the Postmodernists call me!

What also provided a different kind of insight that I thought was worth exploring was that some texts had variants that were recognized as such. It started me off on thinking about how the really influential texts—the metanarratives—have variants, and this was when I prepared a paper on the Valmiki *Ramayana* and the variants of the *Rama katha*, and which I gave as a lecture published in 1978. The idea has since gained currency in the notion of 'the many *Ramayana*s', opening up both new avenues of exploration in *Ramayana* studies and much hostility from certain religious nationalists. Variants of the story had, of course, been observed by earlier scholars, and were well established in scholarly studies of the *Ramayana* and of Hinduism. I began by juxtaposing three important variants that revealed aspects not observed in a comparative way before. My attempt was to compare the Valmiki version with the Buddhist version and the Jaina version, which showed both striking differences and some similarities. It then struck me that even a text that narrates a story that is taken to be absolutely unique, like the Valmiki *Ramayana*, can have variants. Such variants continued for centuries, embellishing the Sanskrit literary tradition with some remarkable poetry and providing philosophical arguments of a different kind from those garnered from what has come to be seen as the central text. The question was, when did the latter come to be treated as a sacred text with a distinctive body of followers, such as the Ramanandis. After this happens, the variants continued, but the focus shifts from narrative to regarding the text as sacred. There had, however, been little comparison of the variants. That was one aspect of my study that made me reconsider how historians look at the texts of Hinduism in contrast to the literary and theological study of the texts.

This also brought home to me the fact that the historian has inevitably to study a religious text from a perspective that is different from the theologian's. I see the history of religion from two perspectives. One is as personal belief often stemming from emotional and psychological needs that are met in the process of worship and faith. As a historian, this does not generally come into my purview except if I were writing a biography. Religion in society also has another role as an enterprise involved in shaping society and the economy to which it was and is tied. Let me quickly add that this is not Marxism, this is common sense! The enterprise it establishes is through institutions and organizations that have a close connection with the functioning of the society, but are under the control of particular religious authorities. For example, we have a huge scatter of religious institutions in many parts of the country dating back to two thousand years. There are Buddhist *vihara*s, *caitya*s (halls of worship), and *stupa*s; *matha*s for the *brahmana*s and varieties of Hindu and Jaina temples; *khanqah*s and *dargah*s, and mosques of Islam, the churches of the Christians, and the *gurdwara* of the Sikhs, to mention just a few. Where did their patronage come from as many were wealthy institutions. Some owned large acreages of fertile land, some were into high-level commerce associated with guilds such as the Ayyavole 500, or the horse trade recorded at Pehowa in the hands of *brahmanas*, and some were recipients of multiple donations from wealthy householders as at Sanchi. What were the politics of the patronage and the competition among donors and recipients? Did the *brahmana* temple committees control the administration of the land granted to them? Who paid for the construction of the monuments? Who determined which castes could enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple and which were forbidden to do so? There is also the question of religious organizations formulating a social code and insisting that members of that religion must observe the code, as, for example, the *Dharmashastra*s or the *sharia*. This was and is a most effective way of controlling society. These are significant historical questions less to do with religion than with the control over society by religious enterprise. It is these the historian has to study, relate to the historical context, and comment upon. This requires some distancing from the religion being studied and an attempt to see it impersonally. It is in these latter studies that there is sometimes a conflict between historians and theologians or believers, and even more so with those who are determined to use religion for political mobilization.

I saw that the form and history of what came to be called Hinduism differs from other religions particularly the Semitic or Abrahamic religions. This difference is significant to the functioning of religions in India and especially in their role as social institutions and organizations. These have perhaps been misunderstood by our acceptance once again of the colonial imprint in defining religion in India on the lines of how religion functioned in European society. The root of the difference lies in the origins and history of these religions. The belief in the existence of a historical founder with a history of sects breaking away from the core doctrine, as in most religions, was known to India, but only in Buddhism and Jainism and in what was called the Shramanic tradition in ancient times. This was not so in Hinduism. We have missed out on the significance of this difference. The Shramanic is different from what we call Hinduism. The latter was more a mosaic of sects where a sect could arise independently of, or only tenuously linked to, belief systems of either an orthodox or a heterodox kind, and which had preachers who were generally historical persons. Some of these sects had strong beliefs about deities and rituals, others evoked more abstract power, or even questioned belief, and most were directly or indirectly linked to caste.

Such a multiplicity of sects that sprout, detaching themselves sometimes amoeba-like from existing sects, and sometimes as independent entities, have all been bunched together and brought under a single umbrella-like label of Hinduism. This does not do justice to the origins, beliefs, and the functions of these sects. I see Hinduism historically as a mosaic of sects, where some talked to each other, or had overlapping edges, whereas others did not, or they were at a distance from each other. There was a shading off from the orthodox to the heterodox. This also allowed them to induct sects with strands of other religious systems, sometimes leading to a large number of sects with mixed religious teaching and observances. At the non-elite levels of society, which of course, included the majority of people, there was much flexibility and fluidity in belief and worship. It was possibly this structure of religious forms that also allowed for a natural coexistence rather than a forced one. Where there were conflicts, such conflicts occurred between sects rather than between large monolithic religions.

If this was the practice among the majority of people, then the concept of religion as uniform and monolithic seemed incorrect and inappropriate. In the effort of forcing Hinduism to fit into the form that colonial scholarship had envisaged for it, little justice was done to a religion that was differently constructed, and one where the difference should be understood and appreciated. This difference applied to other religions as practiced in India as well. Religion was significantly different from the Judeo-Christian of Europe and that makes it worth another kind of careful study. We cannot push the observance of religions in India into the Judeo-Christian framework that clearly does not fit. We have to find a new framework for religious articulation in India.

I find it significant that in India two kinds of *dharma* (religion), were recognized in the early centuries. The two belief systems whose presence is repeatedly stated in Indian texts from the mid-first millennium BC onwards were what were called the Brahmana and Shramana (from *shramana* referring to monks of various heterodox orders). Vedic Brahmanism was the orthodoxy that posited belief in deities, the divine sanctity of the *Vedas*, and the immortality of the soul. Shramanism was opposed to this and *shramanas* were labelled as *nastika* by the orthodox. From the edicts of Ashoka to the account of India by Al-Biruni, a period of 1,500 years, the duality of the *brahmana–shramana*, is a frequently repeated concept in references to religion. There were a large number of sects that drew from one or the other in various forms, or from quite independent ideas.

These were separate, some fundamentally opposed, but coexisting. The one did not hunt down the other, except on a few occasions, even if there was a claim of heresy. This does not mean that the sects were innately tolerant, but that there were ways in which they did not have to be frontally intolerant. Where there was disharmony, or intolerance and even violence for reasons of religion, it was between sects and not between two monolithic religions that drew on an all-India following with instant communication. Nevertheless, this was a picture very different from that of Europe where there was a Catholic obsession with heresy.

The sectarian expansion increased in medieval times, in the last thousand years, with sects that also reflected the presence of Islam in India. Much of what we define as Hinduism today in terms of belief and practice refers back to people and events of these times. But here again I would say that there is a difference between Islam in west-Asian history and Islam in India. We have tended to look upon Islam in India essentially in its role at the political level and only marginally its religio-philosophical or social functions. We have not studied in depth its role in the making of new social forms and adjustments to caste. This would require examining how caste entered and changed Islamic religious activities. Islamic orthodoxy may not be happy with such studies, yet they are essential to an understanding of many societies of that period. The history of religion cannot be adequately studied only from the texts in Sanskrit and Arabic, familiar to upper castes and elites. Religions practised by the majority of Indians, those lower down in the social scale, who gave primacy to their religion through identifying with local sects rather than with texts alone, need greater attention.

I think it is necessary to move away from the colonial construct of the two monolithic religions of India—Hinduism and Islam—and study them not as monolithic religions, but as diversified expressions of the religious, both at a personal level and as social forms.

The polymorphous aspect that you were referring to as essential to all Indian religions is in part a reflection of the close interface between sect and caste. Some of the larger sects became castes, such as the Lingayat. The articulation of religion through sects began prior to Islam and continues to this day extending the form to include sects associated with Islam and other religions, if thought worthwhile. There are many Islamic sects that have observed differences in belief and worship. But in present times, with conscious Islamization, such sects are beginning to see themselves not so much as sects, but as Muslims of the conventional kind. This is a parallel movement to the effort of the Hindutva to bring all sects into a uniform Hindu fold. Therefore, one really has to see religion in India through the lens of the sect, rather than look for some overarching form that brings everybody in together under a single religious label. This, of course, is what has been going on over the last couple of centuries, what with Orientalist and nationalist scholars thinking of religion in terms of large, single, uniform, overarching, monolithic religions. A century ago this was adopted for political reasons and a lack of familiarity with religions other than the Abrahamic as subjects of comparative study. But as with everything else the politics of the present should not be imposed on the past. If the relationship between religion and society functioned in a different manner from today—and more so among the majority of Indians—then the differences have to be pointed out and explained. We tend to think that only political history changes, but in fact all aspects of society change, and major changes are registered in religious belief and activities.

I began to think that perhaps one of the problems with looking at the history of religion was that we start with the imprint of the Judeo-Christian, and we tend to assume that all religions follow that pattern. Such an imprint points to a historical founder, a monotheistic deity to the exclusion of all others, a single sacred book, a church, congregational worship, the possibility of conversion, the socialization of children through a particular kind of education, and the insistence on obeying the religious laws or codes proclaimed for the human life cycle of marriage, occupation, and inheritance. These were not the characteristics of every religion in times before the modern and much less so in the religion that we call Hinduism. It is now being introduced in the turn that is being given to Hinduism by the proponents of the Hindutva.

It seemed to me historically incorrect to use a label such as Hinduism, including, as it does in Orientalist and colonialist research, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and such like. Buddhism and Jainism disagreed fundamentally with the orthodox Vedic tradition, and the Puranic tradition was hostile to them. The great grammarian Patanjali says of them that the relationship between the *brahmana*s and *shramana*s can be compared to that between the snake and the mongoose!

So I think that the history of religions in this country has to be written differently. Since I am not trained as a historian of religion, I did not take it upon myself to attempt such a history, but I think it is waiting to be written. A history of religions in India would have to see religion as drawn from Indian social concerns with some wishing to address these concerns and others wishing to control society through claiming to address the concerns through religious belief and practice. Every religion in India has inspired evocations of sheer beauty that are stunning and that have in turn inspired a high quality of creativity in literature, music, and art. Yet other aspects of the power of these religions have been the cause of some of the worst forms of human oppression. The prevalence of the Dalit in every Indian religion is an example of this. Even those that claim that all men are equal in the eyes of God have oppressed the people at the bottom of the social ladder—the Dalits and the Adivasis. At a more obvious and immediate level we have witnessed throughout history the subordination of women, barring a few exceptions. Segregation as a characteristic of social ordering, whether of women or of those at the lowest social levels, is not unique to India. Early societies the world over were not given to governing through a secular democracy, but the form and nature of social segregation in India has been such that some say it is more severe in Indian civilization than in most others. It is the two sides of the coin present in most premodern cultures. As a historian one has to write about both, however unpalatable one side may be. If there was some degree of tolerance among religious groups, there was at the same time intense intolerance of the Dalit groups—the Chandala, the Pasmandas, the Mazhabis—by the socially superior in all religions. When we discuss tolerance and intolerance we should think beyond religion to social segregations of various kinds.

Your third question refers to the emergence of Hindutva. It came to the forefront in the twentieth century and became the ideology of Hindu political nationalism, although claiming to be the religion. I call it 'Syndicated Hinduism' for obvious reasons, but I distinguish between Hinduism as a religion and Hindutva as a political ideology. Those that support Hindutva claim to be Hindus, but not all Hindus are supporters of Hindutva. Its aim is the establishing of a Hindu Rashtra. Its premises are based on the colonial reading of Indian history and of Hinduism, and it appears to be an attempt to formulate Hinduism in the Judaeo-Christian frame. Was this a recognition that a religion has to become an ideology if it is to be used for political mobilization? That this was to be a significant part of its function is clear from the writings of those that have propagated it since the 1930s.

Part of this effort was to assert that Hindus also have the omniscient God, the single sacred book, congregational worship, possibly even a creed, conversion, and so on. The kinds of things that make it easy, it seems, to mobilize people on the basis of religion and to provide quick identities. This was done much more easily with Christianity in Europe, and with

Islam in west Asia and elsewhere, where there is a history of the political mobilization of large groups of people in the name of religion. Was this the pattern in India as well or was religion more localized and diversified? Can this be seen as a fundamental difference between the practice and the sociology of religion in Europe as compared to India?

Major mobilizations from the past in the name of religion in India, do not easily come to mind. There was intolerance and violence at times, but it was localized. Kalhana in the *Rajatarangini* mentions Buddhist monks at the receiving end of violence in Gandhara in the mid-first millennium AD, but this is not commented upon by others, nor is the attack on Jaina monks in south India. These were sectarian conflicts, not untouched by royal command. Some conflicts were the result of religious differences, others could be due to financial needs. Kalhana describes in detail some Hindu kings looting rich temples and desecrating idols because of a fiscal crisis in Kashmir. This was prior to the establishment of Muslim rule in India. But such experiences of intolerance did not lead to wide-scale violence across the country. These were not monolithic religions and the mobilization was local, and the issues may well have been political, financial, or religious, but treated as local. To that extent Hindutva is symptomatic of a socio-economic change that Hindu societies are undergoing at the moment and reflective of our times. However, the pattern that it has chosen to adopt is one that challenges the older social orientation of Hinduism.

The Ideologues of Hindu Nationalism

RJ: Was it closely related to the rise of Hindu nationalism, closely related to the colonial period?

RT: It has been argued that it is closely linked to colonial constructions of Indian society and religion, and I would agree.

Whatever roots it may have had in the nineteenth century socio-religious reform movements and trends of the time, the reality of Hindutva dates to the early twentieth century, the period of the visible presence of the two religious nationalisms—the Hindu Mahasabha and its contemporary, the Muslim League. The same kind of religious fundamentalism affects certain members of both groups at the same time.

It is given a clearer shape and form by ideologues of Hindu nationalism, such as Savarkar and Golwalkar. A Hindu is defined by two claims, that his *pitribhumi* (the land of his ancestors) and his *punyabhumi* (the land of his religion) are within India. This 'land' coincides with the territory of British India—definitively and cartographically certain. The territories of earlier times such as Jambudvipa or Aryavarta, or Bharatvarsha, or even al-Hind, were less well-defined. The Hindu who qualified to be so on the basis of these two claims, was the primary citizen of India. Muslims and Christians were automatically discounted since their ancestors were said to be migrants into India and their religions arose in territories outside British India. The Parsis were presumably too small in number and had no political stake in the country. These others were technically all aliens. Incidentally, this is also one of the reasons why it is necessary to maintain that the Aryans were indigenous to India. Since Aryanism is held to be foundational to Hindu culture, the people from whom it originated have to have been living within the territory of British India, and their religion has to have originated in these lands. If one argues that they migrated into India from outside the boundaries of British India, they would have to be called foreigners! However much we as historians may underline the fact that modern cartographic boundaries cannot be taken back to ancient times, the modern boundary has a tenacious hold on the public mind. To suggest, as historians do, that we have to be flexible about boundaries in ancient times, is generally unacceptable.

RJ: Maybe that is why Mahatma Gandhi gave such a grand attention to Savarkar in his *Hind Swaraj*, and not much to Islam and Muslim thinkers. Gandhi seems to be very concerned by Savarkar's ideology and his redefining of the Indian culture, maybe in terms of the Hindutva.

RT: It was the construing of history in this fashion that raised questions in the minds of many of us historians and others about the political ideology of Hindutva. Our kind of history was described as anti-Hindu and, therefore, anti-Indian and anti-national.

NB: In recent years we are seeing a deeper transformation. Hindutva is not only a communal, social force; it not only seeks to create a Hindutva social imaginary, it is in state power. So we need to see not only how Hindutva seeks to transform Hinduism, but how it seeks to refashion the state. It is forced to speak in many voices, many languages, and reconcile the contradictions within these. It affirms its commitment to the constitution, but mobilizes lynch mobs against those whose social and political presence it disapproves, it mobilizes the language of religion to target the religious other, but uses the rhetoric of development to unify its social support.

RT: But that's very recent, and the result of coming into power, although it has lain low for many decades. Personally, I think it has not been effective in telling us what is meant by 'development'. But then I don't think development was the real objective.

NB: We have been seeing this rhetoric of development for the last decade and a half. But now it is being foregrounded in a different way. In this scenario how do you see the life of the language of religion in the politics of Hindutva?

RT: I think what is being sought to be unified is not anybody and everybody. There are either those who are declared

Hindus, are caste Hindus, or those who are Dalits or tribals who don't really have a distinctive 'other' religion as viewed from the Hindutva perspective, although their religion is in effect distinct. Attempts are being made to bring them into the Hindutva fold. One has to be clear about why this is being done. I think there are many reasons. One is to take measures to constantly increase the numbers of Hindus so that the Hindus remain a permanent majority community. A rather absurd belief maintains that if the Muslims procreate in large numbers they will outstrip the numbers of Hindus. A community constituting 12 per cent of the population cannot outstrip a community that makes up 80 per cent of the population, no matter how hugely it procreates, unless the latter stops procreating altogether, which, of course, will not happen. And even if it did, it would take centuries. Conversion to Hinduism, although technically doubtful, will increase the vote bank based on a Hindu religious identity. There isn't any talk at the moment of Muslims and Christians also being part of this unification and the silence may be because in caste terms they are *mleccha*, outside the pale. There is a hesitation in accepting that Dalits who are Christians or Muslims should have the same rights in the reservation quotas as those Dalits who claim to be closer to the Hindu tradition.

So I don't think that it's a unification of everybody. It is a unification of the larger body of Hindus and those who have the potential of being converted to the Hindu religion. To convert Muslims would be more difficult as many at lower levels of society have become more conscious of the formal religion through Islamization. It is, of course, much easier to convert Adivasis, from an informal belief system to an organized religion, as was done in Gujarat where they were then used in the genocide of 2002. And, of course, it also depends on the goodies that are offered.

NB: What about the language of religion in the politics of our times? How does it connect to the rhetoric of development? Or do you see in these two languages a conflict that cannot be reconciled?

RT: It's a question whether development is a serious idea or just a slogan to allay fears since the activities of the 'fringe elements' are becoming alarmingly frightening. It has recently become a slogan which is generously thrown about in political speeches, whether on the media or at election gatherings. In any public sense, it's become prominent after the election of 2014 and is now used more as a mantra than as a serious change of economic policy.

If they are serious about development, they should spell out in greater detail what it implies, and how it will be implemented. If they support a secular democracy then they would have to backtrack on one of the fundamentals of Hindutva, which is that Hindus are the primary citizens and presumably will benefit thereby. Development would involve clarifying who are to be the beneficiaries. Are they willing to do that? I think there will probably continue to be an obfuscation of the issue by claiming to be more interested in development than religion, but in effect ensuring by various means that it is the Hindu citizen who gets to the forefront. The others will just tag along as best as they can, subjected to the fear of the activities of 'fringe elements'.

RJ: They might not say it, but I think Indian society is ready to say it.

RT: You mean....

RJ: I mean the new generation of Indians.

RT: The new generation, yes. The new generation is certainly influenced by the political agenda of the Sangh Parivar. And that's also worrying. I say this not only because I am opposed to the manner in which politics is being used to sneak in religion and caste, and in effect make them the forms of identity, which for me is a denial of the democratic and the secular, but also because in the propagation of their understanding of culture, for instance, discussion and debate is disallowed and undermined in ways that can be open or hidden, violent or subtle. The majority of the new generation—and fortunately there are exceptions—seems uninterested in new aspects of knowledge, grounded as they are through their formative years in mindlessly repeating what they are told in order just to get marks and keep moving on the education escalator. Reading on the Internet is conducive to gathering information, and sometimes misinformation, but not to encouraging critical thinking.

V

The Historian and the Epic

Looking at the Epic

RJ: In your essay 'The Historian and the Epic', you say 'the historian's interest in epic literature arises from the argument that epic literature generally documents a period which is prior to that of early recorded history. How does a historian like you—who is a rationalist, and who believes in a chronological sequence of events in history—analyse the assumptions of an epic literature which lacks historicity?

RT: First, the historian can study aspects of the epic, as I, for example, have done in my last book (*The Past Before Us*). I argue that the epic is telling us about a particular kind of society, or particular kinds of societies. I then argue that the *Mahabharata* is telling us primarily about clan society, and how it's organized, how it functions, what are its values, and so on. The *Ramayana* is telling us about a conflict between a clan society and an emergent kingdom. This is one way—apart from others—in which a historian can look at the epics, or for that matter any text. The historian is interested in many aspects of a text and is also interested in how a text reflects society—its forms, structures, and interconnections. This is conveyed through the particularities of the narrative and the characteristics of those who figure in it. The historian should unravel these aspects and in the process provoke further thought.

So the historian doesn't have to necessarily prove that the events described in the epics are historically accurate, that they actually happened that way. But the historian can derive from the epic the understanding of the kind of societies involved in those events. And there I would say that the two epics do give us a creatively defined picture of both clan society and the incipient kingdom. Trying to extract the form of the societies from the epics becomes one of the ways in which history can relate to epic literature.

The second aspect is that this requires complex methods of investigation. As with all epics of early times, there are additions and interpolations to the composition and the Indian epics are as prone to this as others, perhaps even a little more, given the many centuries they have been in circulation. This is part of the reason why, for scholarly use, it helps if there is a critical edition. Such editions have been prepared for the *Mahabharata* in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune and for the *Ramayana* in the Oriental Institute in Baroda. The available variant texts in Sanskrit, and in some other Indian languages as well, were consulted for cross reference, to put together a text that would reflect their common contents and what might possibly have been an early version. This edition carries detailed discussions of grammatical forms and alternate readings. Changes in grammatical forms and literary styles in a language are characteristic of how a language changes—as all languages do—after a long while. So linguistic and stylistic analyses of texts can inform us roughly when a particular section conforming to a particular linguistic pattern was composed. Thus, it is generally agreed that the first and last books of the *Ramayana* are later than the rest of the epic. There has been much discussion on this among scholars, as summarized broadly by John Brockington. Similarly, there are certain sections of the *Mahabharata* that are also thought to be perhaps later than others, such as the 'Shanti Parvan' and the 'Anushasana Parvan'. Some alternate readings also require a critical edition where interpolations occur in sufficient number. A critical edition may still not take us back to the original composition, but it probably does take us a little closer.

Similarly, in our times the evidence from archaeological excavations of sites thought to be those mentioned in the texts, such as Hastinapur, the Kaurava capital near Meerut, or Indraprastha, the Pandava capital in Delhi, both described in the *Mahabharata*, may be used, but only up to a point to illustrate some of the material culture referred to in the texts, and thereby illumine some segments of the texts. However, such evidence does not provide a date for the entire text. Correlating evidence from text and artefact requires great care. Far from being palatial settlements, both these sites in excavation have revealed mud-brick and wattle-and-daub constructions hardly suggesting regal splendour. If the identity of the site is accepted, then it certainly suggests some poetic licence in the textual description, something that is commonly found in all early literatures. To base the historicity and finite chronology of the texts on such comparisons with archaeological evidence is clearly problematic and requires far more investigation.

Partly because they were possibly based on an oral composition, the tendency to add to or subtract from the composition, is more likely. Those of us who are familiar with recitations of ballads or lengthy folk poems recognize that bits and pieces get added to the composition in the course of recitation, especially when it is being explained. A case in point are the recitations of the Pandavani. The other reason for interpolations is that the time span of the composition when all this is happening tends to be rather long. The epics are lengthy and their composition in their present form took a long time. A small group of scholars, however, argues that the *Mahabharata*, for example, was composed in a span of about a hundred years.

Earlier scholars, such as V.S. Sukthankar who supervised the critical edition, supported a much more extended period for the composition of both and suggested 400 BC to AD 400. This is almost a millennium. Such a chronology means having to think in terms of a core composition at approximately the start of this span, to which additions were made as its popularity increased. This is supported from references to objects that were known only in later times, such as the argument of H.D. Sankalia that the signet ring came with the Indo-Greeks at the turn of the Christian era. Its role in the narrative of the *Ramayana* would thus date that section to a later date. This makes it difficult for the historian to give a single definitive date for an epic or the society it represents. Societies changed over the period when an epic was composed so that the composition reflects elements of the previous societies. The process of change thus reflected is of great interest to the historian. Historians no longer write about a specific 'epic age'.

The Historicity of the Epic

RJ: What I found interesting in your work on Indian epics is the juxtaposition between the 'lineage-based' societies or 'chiefships' and kingship. My question is about the legitimacy of these chiefships and kingships. Does this legitimacy come from gods or does it come from politics? Because we see that this legitimacy of kingship extends from birth, but also sometimes it is appointed by gods. We have two foundations of legitimacy.

RT: Just to clarify a point: the term earlier used by historians for the *gana-sangha*s and the *gana-rajya*s was republics, but I think that chiefships is more appropriate. Chiefships, as I use the term, assume a small society, that of clans identified by lineages claiming the same or a close ancestry. Families included within the clan have a largely equal status and common rights. I have argued that these are not kingdoms where one person or by extension a family becomes dominant. The title of *raja* in the early texts refers to the one who shines or leads and is better translated as 'chief' rather than as 'king'. Buddhist texts, for instance, often refer to the many *raja*s of the Chedi clan at any given time. Obviously, this is not a reference to kings, but to heads of families that constitute the larger Chedi clan and they probably sat in the Chedi assembly. This distinction is also based on the increased powers of the king in various forms of kingship, and on his decision-making in consultation with other clansmen that, however, decrease when kingship is introduced. There are, of course, no sharp demarcations in the texts to enable one to distinguish one form from the other. One has to recognize that at some points there are overlapping ideas.

The changing forms of the polity that constitute the transition from clan or lineage society to a kingdom, involve more than just these changes. The historian has to ask how it changed. This involves putting a particular set of questions to the sources, questions of a kind that may provide answers to other aspects of the change as well. For example, one may ask what are the resources that are used by the society and on which it bases its daily life? Who owns and controls these resources and who works them and provides the necessary labour? Are the resources equally distributed or do some live off them to a greater degree than others? If these differences lead to social inequalities how are they explained and legitimized so as to make the distribution, although not equal, nevertheless acceptable to all? Were they acceptable to all or did some people complain, and if they did so, then what was the form of the complaint? And one could ask many more questions. This takes the historical reconstruction beyond just the families that were powerful in the chiefship or the king who accumulated power in the system of kingship.

As regards the legitimacy of the system, or the question of what legitimizes the system, there is, of course, a difference in the various traditions. In the earlier Brahmanical traditions, it is a deity that most often appoints a *raja* to rule in a difficult situation. The assembly of the Vrishni clans, to which Krishna belonged, as described in the *Mahabharata*, gives virtually equal status to the families within the clans. The exceptions come from later times when the Buddhists, for example, had another view. For them, legitimacy cannot come from the gods, as the existence of deities is doubtful at best. Conflict and anarchy in human society, interestingly, arise over family and property, and require a solution. Therefore, the people so involved get together and appoint one amongst them to rule. It is the people, the humans, who appoint one amongst them to take on the authority to rule.

So the legitimacy in the Brahmanical tradition initially comes from the gods, and in later texts the people are sometimes involved, but in the Buddhist tradition it comes solely from the people.

RJ: Is that why in the Buddhist tradition of historiography they refer to the epics as meaningless narratives?

RT: Sometimes, yes, perhaps because such stories support a point of view that the Buddhists don't always agree with.

NB: About reading epics, you said that they reflect what was important at the time. What is necessary to understand then is not the historicity of the events described, but the way the representation reflects the perceptions of that time.

RT: Not just the perception of that time, but the perception of the kind of society that existed at that time.

NB: Yes. Now, at one level that would be true of all sources.

RT: Yes, that is so.

NB: So can one make two distinctions in the way epics have been read. First, there are the early readings of the *Ramayana*, when people were mining it for sources on social history, for facts. Over the last two decades there has been a shift in the way texts are looked at, and your writings reflect that shift in many ways. Now, the way you are reading texts is different—you're looking at the text as something which needs to be analysed, its politics of representation has to be understood, the way it imagines time has to be unpacked. What you are suggesting is that the text is not transparent. You cannot discover historical facts directly. Only when you unpack the text through its metaphors, its symbolic meanings, its allegories, can you tease out the social history that is embedded in the narrative. You can do that only when you are familiar with the genre and its modes of representation. Are there two modes of reading involved here? Two different operations ... one could say.

As far as I can see you operate at both levels. You are reading the epics to reconstruct the society of the time and the changes within them—the move from clan-based societies to kingdoms—and you are also unpacking the texts to understand how they perceived and represented the societies of the time. Possibly, over the years you have gradually moved from the first order of reading to the second. But you seem to be operating at both levels.

RT: Yes, and I think it's necessary to operate at the two levels, but then in a sense isn't one doing that with any literary source? One is reading the text and asking what it is telling us about the people, the society, the world they live in. One is doing so quite literally in terms of trying to see if one can reconstruct that society, and how it functioned, from what is said. And then, from that one may go on to extrapolate what norms such a society would conform to and what would be its values and where and why it deviates. But such an extrapolation has also to be backed by evidence to support it. Looking for such evidence becomes the other way of attempting to reconstruct that society.

NB: True, but as historians, how do we evaluate the significance between texts that speak of the world through metaphors and allegories and those that speak more directly, recording events that happened? Do we not judge the historical 'facts' embedded within these texts through radically different criteria?

RT: Yes, then there is a difference.

NB: Going back to our earlier discussion of reliability and authority … how do you pose these questions in relation to descriptions of things that you find in different genre of narratives? Doesn't one operate with different notions of facticity when reading different types of texts?

RT: I would say, on the issue of whether it is factual or not, there are bound to be different ways of reading sources since all texts are not written for the same purpose and in the same style. One could compare texts such as the epics and the *Purana*s, with other genres of texts. In the epic the prime function is not to limit the record to events and personalities, but to expand it much further, and take in questions relating to moral dilemmas, ethics, religious sects, political and social forms, the relationship between the ruling caste and the others, and so on. It's a wide dimension, a much wider totality that the epic is expected to cover. The later genres, such as *charita*s (biographies), although they do much the same, are perhaps more restricted to depicting particular categories of society, and particular social, political, economic, and religious concerns. I am making a comparison here with genres written specifically for a historical purpose, the ones that I have described as 'externalized genres' such as historical biographies, chronicles, and inscriptions. In these it is assumed that the prime function is to record events and the personalities concerned with those events.

The Two Levels of Temporality

RJ: Could we come back on these two levels of temporality—one is historical time with which a historian works, and the other one is the time of the epic, which could be cyclical time. How do you make the juxtaposition between the two as a historian working on an epic story?

RT: I think when we as historians work on the epics, we tend to keep ourselves firmly in historical time, in linear time. That is the reason why we say that the epic was composed between this period and that period, and mention the kinds of societies that are being reflected, keeping in mind, however, that the authors of the epics are possibly thinking more in terms of cyclical time. The *Mahabharata* states that the Third Age—the Tretayuga—comes to an end as the Kurukshetra war is drawing to a close. And the Fourth Age—the Kaliyuga—begins at that point. These are mathematically demarcated but do not coincide with specific events. The ages are measured in geometrical progression, so that they hint perhaps at historical time, although the pattern and the measurement are suggestive in their mathematical tidiness more as a reflection of history. The historian has then to project the notion of time into both the cyclical time that the text is speaking of, and the linear time that the historian is searching for, in the text.

RJ: You have a level of cosmological time, but at the same time you have the time of kings and heroes.

RT: Or a human time. A time calculated in terms of human activity.

RJ: So there is a need to distinguish between the two?

RT: You may distinguish between the two or you may just let it be. But again, if I may go on with this theme a little further, one could say that there's a slight contradiction in what I'm saying. It is true that the epic is drawing on cyclical time, and more clearly in its narration of mythology. But the fact that both epics provide a lineage, and give it importance, is an indication of inducting a linear dimension. A lineage in concept and form encapsulates linearity. This is brilliantly brought out in the term used for lineage—*vamsha* (the bamboo or cane plant). This I think is the most pertinent symbol of a lineage. There is a node representing a generation out of which there grows a stem until it comes to the next node and the next segment of a stem, which is the next generation, and so it continues. It is the visual representation of a genealogical structure. And that is undoubtedly linear.

RJ: Does this function only for you as a historian? Can any ordinary Indian read the *Mahabharata* in the same way?

RT: I suspect that the analogy of the *vamsha* suggests the recognition of some linearity in this kind of reckoning which is different from the cycle of time. I like to think of it as the linear segment perhaps being viewed as a small section of an extensive arc that represents the cycle. The linear segments, even when strung together, form just a tiny part of the great arc.

This would allow of a concept of time where the linear is not distinct from the cyclic, but is part of it. There is one seventh-century inscription of the Chalukya king, Pulakesin II, where the two systems are referred to and the date is given in both ways of time reckoning, suggesting their parallel use. However, in the externalized genres of post-Gupta times, with texts recording history in various ways, the linear reckoning is more commonly used. This is also evident from the number of eras that are referred to where one form of establishing authority is to create an era and start using it for official records. Possibly, the two kinds of reckoning time, cyclic and linear, were used separately for different functions, either for ritual requirements or for official records. This would be somewhat akin to the dual use of the solar and lunar calendars today where the lunar is used almost exclusively for calculating many of the dates of festivals and rituals. The kind of time reckoning used has some bearing on the notion of historicity.

RJ: What is the difference between your reading of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* and an ordinary Indian's reading on the level of temporality?

RT: Well, on the level of temporality we historians are obsessive. When did it happen, giving every event a fixed point in linear time, or a bracket in linear time? Non-historians are perhaps not that concerned with dates and the implicit casualty.

NB: Could I return to the earlier point being discussed? You are contrasting the historical time of the historian—objective, chronological, linear—to epic time which is cyclical. Two issues about this binary. As you say, in the epics, too, there is a notion of linear time because of the charting out of the lineage. So which is the time of the epics? Why is cyclical seen as more proper to epics? Second, is the historian's time always linear? We know that historians, too—not just Toynbee, but many others—have conceptualized history in terms of cyclical time. Wouldn't you agree that the way that we look at historical or epic time is itself structured by our location, the politics of our time, and the way we frame the narrative of the past? For instance, it has been suggested that in moments of crisis––in times of seeming doom or the end of the world—the idea of cyclical time returns. So wouldn't you agree that historians could operate with two or three different temporal notions of the rise and decline of dynasties or civilizations?

RT: I would agree with the first point you made, that the way in which we historicize time is determined to a great extent by the point in time in which we are living. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one has looked at time in the epics in a particular way, because one is oneself conditioned by attitudes to time. Presumably, in earlier centuries they would have looked at it somewhat differently, or certainly an Indian readership would have done so. I think I would agree that our obsession with historical time and the exactness of historical time comes from the way in which we have been defining history in the last couple of centuries, where chronology plays a very central role.

But I would not generalize across the board for all writing. Where time is used as a metaphor as in these texts, it has a complex role. The historian has to consider the role played by time in the minds of the author and the audience. The chronology of inscriptions from the mid-first millennium AD is impressively precise as compared to that of the epics and *Purana*s. This precision is clearly making a statement about the content and function of the various categories of texts, apart from telling us that the concept of time itself is being used differently by what some would today call a 'smart' society!

I often think of Fernand Braudel's description of the chronology of an event. He writes of three kinds of time that come into play to determine the chronology of an event: the moment when it happened, the time of the context that acted as a lead up to the event, which may be a couple of decades or a couple of centuries or more, and the *longue durée* (long duration), of the period when factors that eventually contributed to the events may have been in the process of being created or mutated. To these three, some have added a fourth, namely, the point in time when the event is perceived by the historian or whoever is speaking or writing about it. Such a way of seeing time goes beyond measuring time mathematically and adds many dimensions to the historian's analysis of an event.

But on the question of a cyclic rise and decline in history, I'm hesitant to accept the validity of such a projection. Well, yes, historians do speak of cycles of rise and decline, but personally, I don't see them as cycles. There is no agreement on the number of cycles. And then there are civilizations, also said to rise and decline. Toynbee counted twenty-six to cover world history, but Huntington more recently counted only eight. I see them not as cycles of civilization and decline, but as periods in which a particular activity in a particular society is said to achieve high quality and, therefore, becomes the exemplar. What its characteristics are, tend to be viewed from the individual perspective of the historian, and may, therefore, be debated. But since they relate to the achievements of elite groups in the past and are generally viewed by the contemporary equivalents of these, the debate wavers. There can, however, be much discussion about the phases and identity of a civilization. Historians explore these events as and when they are visible or when they were recognized in previous times. The periods of an upswing are compared with other periods where these achievements may have declined and others surfaced. But I don't visualize this as a pattern of cycles of rise and decline.

On the question of civilizations, I should add that I am increasingly dubious about the nineteenth-century notion of a neatly demarcated territory with firm boundaries within which there was the cultivation of the arts, literature, philosophy, science, and architecture, by elite groups of the region, expressing themselves in a single classical language, motivated by a particular religious culture, and achieving great heights of articulation in isolation, whilst excluding those speaking another language or observing a different religion, even those within their own territory. We are now having to come to terms with the universality of ideas that create myths, values of religion, architecture and the arts, and particularly what some call proto-science. Given this, the old notion of claiming which civilization did what in advance of the others, is an idea that is passé. We now tend to look more realistically at the many strands that came together in the creation of an idea or an object, rather than see either as a self-sufficient, isolated manifestation.

The question before the historian today is not how these ideas were nurtured in isolation, but rather discovering the routes by which such ideas were conveyed from one society to another and were reformulated, except, of course rarely, where something happened in isolation. This was what brought about the necessary interaction that is essential to any segment of knowledge encouraging a radical change, irrespective of the change coming either in an accelerated manner or by gradual degrees. The best example is that of astronomy, mathematics, and medicine in Eurasia where advance in knowledge resulted from the interaction of scholars and their theories, in various parts of Asia and Europe. Given the close contacts, not only by conquest which is the popular explanation, but rather by the large numbers of traders and migrants, and visiting scholars, we should perhaps cease to think of civilizations as self-sufficient, segregated entities. The most important characteristic of a civilization may well be its porosity and its ability to absorb ideas and practices from other cultures. The rise and decline of a civilization—if one insists on using what is now a somewhat outmoded concept—is no longer dependent solely on the evolution of its own cultures within a demarcated territory, but is more dependent on the contacts it has with other cultures outside this territory whose boundaries are in any case now increasingly seen as flexible.

My apologies for this long detour, but since the question of cycles of rise and decline in history was brought in, I felt it was connected with how we are now looking differently at time and history. So let's get back to time.

Concepts of Time

NB: Does any society at any point of time have a unitary concept of time? Wouldn't the relevant question for the historian be: 'What conceptions of time were there in a particular society among different social groups and classes and how—and to what extent—did these change?' As Jacques Le Goff shows church time in Feudal Europe was different from the time of merchants. Others have shown that industrial time is different from peasant notion of time, and peasants who become workers have to be disciplined into a new work culture and a new time regime. One might also say that peasants in different societies and different times have varying notions of time. So within the same society there can be a variety—diverse ways of measuring time, experiencing time, conceptualizing time. And these notions are often in conflict with each other, reflecting different structures and systems, different world views ... and they change with wider societal changes. But plural and heterogeneous time often resists being homogenized, and specific forms of negotiations that follow fashion the historical specificity in notions of time. If this is so, why should we think in terms of a universal homogeneous time of history?

RT: I think that first of all, we have to use the plural, and talk about the concepts of time in the plural rather than the singular concept of time, because, as you rightly say, different groups of people have different ways of measuring time, evaluating time, and behaving within the contours of time. And I think that one of the interesting things in the *Mahabharata*, or even in the *Ramayana* for that matter, is the intersection of linear and cyclic time. They were just as comfortable speaking about the end of the Dvaparayuga and the start of the Kaliyuga as the changing cycles of time, as they were about measuring time by *vamsha*s (generations) as a lineage reflecting linear time.

So, yes, I think historians do have to think in terms of different concepts of time. However, in making my earlier statement, I was really looking at it from a kind of generalized historical view. Looking at time in this manner tends to negate the idea of an Epic Age—a concept that we were all brought up on from colonial and nationalist history. This was something of a basket term in which various events and persons could be placed. Some of us started asking which age is the Epic Age? The texts seem to have been composed anywhere between the mid-first millennium BC and the early centuries AD. But, in terms of a generalized notion of where to fit these texts chronologically, the historian tends to use linear time and puts them into a fixed time slot, whereas the texts seem to treat themselves as being almost chronos-free.

NB: If I were to say that the obsession of the historian with chronological dates and linear time is a legacy of positivism … of a time when the concern was with political history, to be unambiguously and precisely structured through a chronology of events…. Once we begin to move beyond the political to look at social institutions, mental structures, economic formations, ecological, and geographical changes … then the unitary frame of political chronology does not help us grasp the temporality of history. Changes at different levels of society proceed at a different pace. One might say they have their own specific rhythm, their own time.

If we are studying the history of perceptions or mental attitudes we need to measure change on a different time scale, and through categories that point to approximations rather that exactness. These changes cannot be always precisely dated, and cannot be accommodated within political chronology. So, in that sense, how would you see the question of historical dating and chronology?

RT: This question is particularly difficult for the study of early Indian history, one of the reasons being that we have so few precise dates for the texts that we're using. We're frequently saying that the text was approximately from this century to that century. One cannot with certainty give a precise date even for an important text such as the Manu *Dharmashastra*, or the Kautilya *Arthashastra*, that was crucial to understanding how society was visualized. It cannot be pinned down to a precise date. One has to say that the Manu *Dharmashastra* could date to approximately the first century BC, although some would prefer the second century AD. The same applies to the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, on the basis of which we argue endlessly about the nature of political economy in early India. Was it in fact completed in the Mauryan period, during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya in the fourth century BC, or was it completed by another person, Vishnugupta, in the third century AD? This is a span of 700 years or so. To insist on precise dating becomes very difficult, given our current knowledge of these texts.

Fifty years ago many books on ancient history included appendices on the dating of the texts used as sources, wherever the date was controversial. Now there's a tendency to say that there's an approximate chronology, and that approximate chronology is not necessarily based on a strictly verifiable dating system, but also on the kind of societies that are being referred to. In other words, there were some societies that were organized in a form that was earlier than others. Earlier forms of societies are thought to be from an earlier period, even if they were seamlessly knit into subsequent ones.

Currently, there is a shift away from focusing only on a precise chronology, unless, of course, one has good evidence for it. I'm not suggesting that one should stop working on chronology, as it would be good if one could get a precise chronology. Instead of saying that this text may have been written in the fourth century BC or the third century AD, it would obviously be an improvement to be able to say it was written in 250 AD. It does make a difference. But at the same time, it's also worthwhile to see that the shift from focusing on precise chronology does force one to look at other aspects of what that text is saying, such as comments on social structures, political economies, religions, and so on. This shift gives more emphasis to other aspects in the construction of a society, rather than just the chronology.

NB: Would you agree that the time of the historian—that is, the narrative time in the books of history—is different from the time as it was experienced? The chronology of events within a history book is different from the chronology as it unfolds in 'real time', in the past. When a historian selects some events of the past as important and narrates them, *she* defines the sequence of narration, the temporality of the events narrated. The dates of events do not change, but the time between events can be condensed or expanded within the narrative, and you can move from the present to the past, not just from the past to the present. So the time of the past that the historian relates to gets reworked within the narrative. If that is so then narrative time depends on how the historian frames her narrative … it has no intrinsic temporality, no necessary linearity.

RJ: But I think that at one point there's a concept which is very problematic for us as moderns: the concept of inevitability. How would a modern historian like to deal with this concept of inevitability which is actually dominant in the epical structure, and especially in cyclical time?

RT: I think this is tied up more closely with the question of eschatology. In a sense, time in the Judeo-Christian tradition also has inevitability—it goes from the Garden of Eden to the Last Judgement. In the cyclical time of the concept of *yugas*, the notion is that at the end of this Mahayuga (the great cycle that incorporates the four lesser ones), there is a return to the original golden age, either with the coming of the tenth incarnation of Vishnu as Kalkin, or after a universal catastrophe that destroys the universe and a Mahayuga emerges anew.

RJ: So a negative eschatology.

RT: It can either be a negative eschatology or it can be a positive eschatology—the return of the utopia at the beginning of the next great cycle.

But then as a historian one may say, 'This is a belief system. This doesn't come into my rendering of the history of the epic.' But one has to keep in mind how the contemporaries of the epic were looking at the history of the epic. And how they were looking at the eschatology of what comes within cyclic time.

RJ: Is there a key concept of social change in the use of time in epics?

RT: Oh, yes, of course! Within the cyclic time theory, the biggest underlining of social change is that each of the four cycles that constitute the great cycle, experiences a decline in *dharma* (righteousness or virtue) from the first utopian cycle to the present fourth cycle, which is dystopia. There is not only a decline in the size of each cycle, which is according to geometrical progression and carefully worked out, there is also a decline in morality and virtue and righteousness—a decline in *dharma*. This is linked not only to the usual vices and evil happenings increasing, but also to an overturning of the social code when lower castes start assuming the rights of upper castes, and when women are liberated.

The decline in *dharma* inevitably leads to social change. The moment it is said that righteousness, virtue, morality are steadily declining, and people are breaking the social codes, it is described as the world turned upside down. The lower castes have usurped the position of the upper castes. There is massive social change by the fourth age. Social change is written into these cycles. But, incidentally, the fact that there was nonconformity with the social codes in the period prior to the formulating of these codes, is either ignored or explained away through a myth.

RJ: So when you compare Hinduism with Jainism and Buddhism, where do you see the differences in the use of cosmological time?

RT: They're fairly similar with a small change in what may be called the visual form. In the Puranic theory of the Mahayuga, it could be argued that the first age comes round full circle, but bypasses the point of its beginning and glides, as it were, into the second age, starting the second cycle, and similarly the third and fourth. The result is a conical spiral because the later cycles decline in size. That could be the shape. In the Buddhist and Jain cosmology, the cycle is completed and there is a downswing and an upswing.

RJ: We know that Mahayana Buddhism was in dialogue with Manichaeism and Christianity.

RT: Quite likely, yes.

RJ: Do you see moments of similarity with these?

RT: I think that the dialogue may have begun earlier. In the sense that as soon as the Mediterranean, south Asia, and west Asia were in trading contact with each other, other contacts also grew. The period from about the second–first century BC to the third century AD, when commerce was active, is also an interesting period in terms of cosmology, with ideas and forms crossing from one to the other. It sees the emergence of ideas on astronomy, mathematics, and medicine reflected in these contacts. The figures that they used, for example, in the details of the cycle of the Mahayuga are figures that are quite similar to the Mesopotamian and the Assyrian, going back to an even earlier period. And later on, of course, other exchanges entered the scene. I think they were all talking to each other. They knew what other scholars elsewhere were thinking, and some of those ideas were travelling to various places. By the end of the first millennium AD, mathematical theories from those working in India were well known elsewhere as, for example, in west Asia.

RJ: They could understand each other much better than we think.

RT: I think they understood each other quite well. Despite the Judeo-Christian tradition, and its emphasis on linear time, the notion of cyclic time was current as well. Both were known. This is what makes me think that the overemphasis on cyclic time in the Indian context, as projected in earlier European scholarship on the subject, is really exaggerated, because however much cyclic time may be accepted as the ultimate time reckoning, life continues on the basis of linear time. But the intersection between the two is very important, and that intersection was common to the cultures of the time and was an aspect of intercommunication and contact.

Linearity and Evolution

NB: You said that life goes on in linear time. Now, in what sense would you argue this? True, there is a certain play of linear time in everyday practice, but this practice is also defined by our conceptions of what we are doing and how we visualize the future. And social groups or individuals who believed in cyclical time, or any form of cosmological time ... their lives would be mediated by these conceptions. So it's not as if time as it is perceived and represented has no connection with the everyday. Wouldn't we undervalue the power of imagined or perceived time if we see them as disjointed from everyday life, powerless to mediate the linearity of everyday practice?

RT: The obvious example in the Indian case is the idea that 'This is Kaliyuga, therefore, everything has to go wrong....' Not only is it the last of the four ages, but is also the age of decline.

NB: Yes, I was thinking of the notion of Kaliyuga.

RT: Whatever is negative in our time tends to be attributed to its happening in the Kaliyuga. It goes against the ordering of society as laid out in the Brahmanical social order. *Dharma* has declined and we're waiting for the catastrophe to happen. We are told that the world rests on a bull, but that in each age one leg of the bull falls off. So Kaliyuga, being the fourth and last *yuga*, it is now standing on just one leg. It is indeed a precarious situation! But fortunately, there are still a few thousand years to go before the end of the Kaliyuga. It may end in a total catastrophe or else when the decline is really acute, the universe may be saved by the tenth *avatara* of Vishnu. This is Kalkin who will arrive riding a white horse and will avert the catastrophe, put the world to rights and inaugurate the next Mahayuga.

But I was really speaking much more directly to the consciousness of using time which is more linear in everyday life.

There is the belief that if you're living in the Kaliyuga, things will go wrong. One could ask about the extent to which such a statement was accepted? Was everything blamed on the Kaliyuga? Or were other reasons sometimes offered as explanation?

NB: So what you're suggesting is a much more complex relationship with these notions of time. What becomes important again, then, is the conflict of time reckoning which you had referred to earlier. Not only are there different conceptions within the epics, in everyday life, too, we live by varying conceptions of time, and we operate with different notions at different times.

RT: Yes, but, to take it literally, the perception and the measurement of time are much easier in a linear concept, and we tend to live by this in our everyday lives, whereas our notions of something bigger may well derive from cyclic time and the notion of the Kaliyuga. But you cannot measure it beyond its given number of years. The possibility of measuring linear time more easily in segments is one reason for making it perhaps more precise. And this in turn makes it applicable to many more aspects of living than cyclic time.

NB: Is linearity only a question of measurement? Is it not true that historians most often operate with linear notions of time because they are tracking progressive change? In the interpretation of ancient Indian history, for instance, we map the movement from lineage to state, shifting agriculture to settled agriculture, pastoralism to peasant cultivation; we trace the coming of iron and production of agrarian surplus, expansion of peasant agriculture, the constitution of a surplus accumulating class, and the formation of the state. The narrative of such transitions and progress is inevitably framed in linear time. It is the frame of the historian that structures this time. The frame suggests the progressive displacement of tribals, pastoralism, kinship, lineage, shifting agriculture, chiefdoms.... Once we shift our focus and begin to explore the history of all that was expected to be displaced, we not only recover histories of 'survivals', but a complex entangled history of these supposedly older forms within changing societies, we have combined and conjoined forms, interlacing of times. So the linear metanarrative gets fractured.

RT: I think one has to distinguish here between linearity and evolution. I think linearity simply means that one is measuring time along a linear scale, and locating people and events along that scale. This in a sense means two things: that it becomes easier to write history, because there is a location and a moment, and secondly that, in associating time with events, an emphasis on causation seems logical, that what comes first is followed by what comes later. To make a causal link with what came later, one must know what preceded it. Causation can perhaps be seen as potentially implicit in historical chronology and more so in linear time.

What one is discussing when talking about the change from lineage to state, and the transformation of society into urban society, is along a linear dimension. The fact that those kinds of societies can exist not only where they were actually located historically, but in other places as well, involves the question whether societies evolve. But does one argue then that all societies have to evolve in a particular way? Or can one argue that in this particular case, this society developed from lineage systems into urban centres and kingdoms, that sometimes eventually became the nucleus of an empire; the evolution took place in a particular area, whereas it didn't take place in other areas. Therefore, chiefdoms survive, peasant agriculture without a state survives, various other systems based on clans survive. But one has to make a distinction between what survives and why it does not change.

NB: I agree, but just to wrap up this question—my concern is that when we frame our narratives within such a progressive linear time, then we focus on those changes in which we discover linearity, and we neglect those histories that cannot be accommodated easily within this frame. As you were saying, there are many areas of societal change that fall outside the gaze of the historian. I think this happens partly because these histories cannot be easily explained and incorporated within linear time. What was outside cannot become inside the narrative frame so easily. In fact, the objectivity of the historian itself gets structured by the linear frame through which the past is understood.

RT: The outside did not become part of the inside in an earlier period of historical time?

NB: Yes, yes.

RT: ... Which is now undergoing change?

NB: Yes, while the earlier framing argument is disturbed it has not been radically rethought ... and here I'm referring to ancient Indian history, specifically. What were excluded from the story earlier are being incorporated, but the frame is not being reworked. Can that be done within the structure of this linear frame?

RT: Yes. I wouldn't say that it has radically disrupted linearity, I would say that there are certain historical points at which there are disruptions, and these are the points that some of us are reconsidering now. But I would not argue that it has so radically disrupted the linearity that it requires us to rethink the position.

RJ: When you bring in this concept of evolution in contradistinction to linearity, don't you think that there is an emphasis on individual will and the role that the individual can play either in the Indian epics or in historical time? What is the role of the individual volition in Indian epics?

RT: We don't know if these characters were real characters, and, if so, what their individual roles might have been. The most we can say is that the epic authors are presenting these individuals as being much more effective in terms of whatever they're doing—good, bad, or indifferent. But it's really in the hands of the authors of the epics whether they can create the possibility of portraying the individual as playing a role or not.

The Heroes and Exile

RJ: Actually, I was pointing to the way the heroes are portrayed. For example, in your work you refer to the phenomenon of exile in relation to the heroes, and how this phenomenon displays the heroic qualities of the main character in the Indian epics. Could we make a comparison with the *Odyssey* where we have the same phenomenon of exile?

RT: Well, yes. But we have to ask ourselves, 'Why is it that....' I think, if I'm not mistaken, in most of the epics there is a period of exile, one way or the other. We have to ask ourselves, 'Why was it necessary to have a period of exile?'

One easy explanation is that exile is the Other Place and what happens there is often the reverse of where one comes from. It's the alternative location and society. Life in exile is different from one's normal life and above all it is unpredictable. Okay? So the heroes are placed in a location that is entirely different from their usual environment, they're therefore floundering and trying to find themselves. This heightens their problems, their choices, and makes the heroes more real, however unreal their problems may be. The characterization is less of a stereotype as compared to that on home ground. The application of the social code seems to be more flexible. The forest becomes the liminal space and the space for the unexpected.

For the poet, a period of exile is a godsend, because the poet can expand on his narration of happenings when the protagonists are in exile. He spins out a story, and then concludes by saying: 'I'll tell you tomorrow what happens next'. And then tomorrow, he spins out another story, and this continues. He is assured of an audience that wants to know what happened next. This endless storytelling, which is so essential to the epic genre, is facilitated by a period in exile. The pace of life is more stretched out. Endless storytelling is restricted if the audience is sitting in a royal court, because there, sooner or later someone will say, 'We've had enough, now stop'. Events that happen in familiar locations are framed by the audience since it knows the limitations of time and space. But in exile, events can be drawn out with added stories. Possibly, this also went into making up a particular style common to the *Mahabharata* and the *Panchatantra*, which is the boxing-in of stories, where one story leads to the next and that leads to another and so on. And then finally there is a return to the original story.

Exile heightens the difference between the background that the heroes have come from, and that to which they will eventually be returning. It is a period of transition, and might even suggest other solutions to problems. In this transition, the emphasis is on enjoyment and self-reflection, and attempts to understand problematic situations. As is the case with pilgrimages and pilgrimage centres, living in exile encourages some degree of erosion in the strict observance of caste and status hierarchies, possibly even rituals. Bhima fathered a son with a *rakshasi*, demoness Hidimba, and the boy was accepted by the family without bothering with rules of endogamy and exogamy. All of this happens without too much comment. And, of course, exile in an alien background encourages fantasy and the mysterious. It required the wine-dark seas of Homer and the foliage-encrusted forests of the Indian epics to convince listeners of the presence of sirens and *apsaras*.

I think that exile is really intrinsic to epic poetry. The forest where the exile takes place—and the same would apply to Homer's *Odyssey* where the hero wanders across the wine-dark seas—the location of exile has its own interest. In the Indian epics, it's always the forest, seen also as wilderness. And, going back to the question of where one comes from and the alternative context, the early Sanskrit texts are replete with references to the dichotomy of the forest and the settled area, which is referred to as the *aranya* and the *grama*—the wilderness and the village, and in later texts as the *vana* and the *kshetra*, literally, the forest and the field.

RJ: There is also kingship and forest.

RT: That comes a little later and we're still only talking about locations. So there's the forest and the village. That dichotomy is fundamental, and I think it is so in the Indian context because, after all, one begins with the settlement, where one's born and raised, one becomes a householder with a family and occupation. Those that wish to study temporarily leave the settlement, but most remain even for acquiring a skill. As life nears its end, one is expected to go to the forest. So that link, that thread, is always there. And this is intended as an ideal, for few could or wanted to follow this routine. In some ways it was a luxury for those that could afford it. The majority had to be at their occupation until the end of their days.

The confrontation, as it were, between the settlement and the forest, between living a settled life and being in exile, is a confrontation which is suggestive perhaps of ways in which Indian society envisaged itself. In the *Odyssey*, the exile is on the sea, not on land. Ulysses and his men go from port to port all over the Mediterranean experiencing the strange and the weird. The bard can take the hero here and there, inventing stories continuously, and carrying him to unknown places. And in the course of travelling and meeting up with problems, the hero is thinking of solutions. His concern is with getting back to where he came from.

RJ: And he becomes wiser.

RT: And he becomes wiser. I think that this dichotomy of the settlement and the sea is something internalized by the Greeks in their archipelago and seafaring existence. In India it was the settlement and the forest. I find the difference worth thinking about.

RJ: This is very interesting because we were talking about the cyclical time, the cosmological time, the epic time, compared to the linear time and the historical time. Could this phenomenon of exile, as a quality of heroes, be repeated in the historical time and the linear time? Take for example the revolutionaries of the twentieth century. Most of them go into exile and come back victorious. You have Fidel Castro of Cuba, you have Lenin, you have Khomeini of Iran, and you have Gandhi, who actually is not in exile, but comes back victorious from South Africa. So I think, once again, there is a rapprochement between the phenomenon of the hero in linear time and the hero in epic time.

RT: There is that. And also, in the modern periods of exile that you mention they're doing the same thing. They're thinking about, 'Where are we? What are we doing here? What are the solutions? What is going to happen?' The future is crucially important.

RJ: So there is a period of incubation and maturity.

RT: Yes. It certainly seems to characterize the earlier generation of political heroes linked to the movements for independence as rather different from the present ones. For the former, exile could take the form of sometimes fairly long periods of imprisonment. They used exile to read, think, discuss their thoughts, and construct a vision of the society they wanted to create. This is evident in the lives of Gandhi, Nehru, and Nelson Mandela. The current ones, never having been exiled in any substantial way, and with little reading, tend to lack such a vision. I am not suggesting exile as a solution for them, but periods of being away from routine activities, might give a better foundation to people in public life! But more seriously, if I can return to past times, this ties up with what some of the texts say about why you go to the forest. One reason to go there is to think. This is, of course, an exaggeration as you don't have to go to the forest to think. But the metaphor of such a connection is worth examining.

NB: Stories of exile are there not only in the epics. Ramanujan shows how stories of exile play an important functional role within folk tales.

> In many folk tales the story begins with a prince within a kingdom ... he does something that is not kingly, not wise, violates the norms of good, kingly behaviour. So he is punished. He moves out of this normative world, the royal world to which he belongs, and moves into the world outside, in exile, and travels through different places, and especially to spaces that are unfamiliar. This travel creates the possibility of confrontations with the world, with the strange and unknown. Through travel the king acquires knowledge, becomes wise. Exile and travel thus constitutes the prince as a normative individual, one worthy of returning to his kingdom, and assuming power.

RT: I think the idea that when in exile one has to come to terms with the unfamiliar is evident and more so in the epics. The Homeric epic demonstrates this unfailingly through the constant looming up of the unfamiliar if not the distinctly weird on the journey home. In the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, there is also the presence of creatures of fantasy. The exaggerated descriptions of demons are partly to demonstrate that the heroes have to contend with the scary and unfamiliar. This further extends the difference between the places where the heroes came from and where they are now in exile. Exile is the unfamiliar, the unknown, the wilderness.

Retaliation and Forgiveness

RJ: It's also the distanciation that is needed for this social change.

NB: But then, in this, the closure is through a return. There is not just exile, but a return too. In most cases, this return is very important for it closes the story … a travel through time which is also a travel over space. But the closure implies a certain closure of time, and a folding back of space, from the non-normative and the strange, to the normative world. Exile is not permanent exclusion from the normative, it is inclusion too. Exile makes the reincorporation possible. It reconstitutes the individual, making him worthy of reincorporation.

RT: It implies a closure of time, yes, but not before the cataclysmic event towards which the narrative has been moving: the battle between those who have been chiselled through the narrative into, to put it crudely, good and evil. The battle has to be won by the good, although this is done through a variety of devious and complex ways if need be. These ways are perhaps morally more problematic in the *Mahabharata* than in the *Ramayana*. This was a question raised by Bimal Matilal, among others. In the former, advice is helpful to the heroes, but it can be ethically somewhat dubious. In the latter, the choices are more straightforward, but the decisions perhaps not so attractive. In neither case is it a simple fight, and there is a constant play on the rights and wrongs of the protagonists, and even on the battle. Eventually it is over.

What is significant in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* is that the closure is not 'And they lived happily ever after'. In both cases, the closure is clouded in the uncertainty of 'Was this a moral action or not, was it avoidable?' In the case of the *Ramayana*, it is the second banishment of Sita even if, as some scholars argue, this was an episode added later to the original epic. It dogs the events towards the last phase. In the *Mahabharata*, the question was whether it was a morally justified war, involving the killing of one's kinsfolk, a question constantly asked by the survivors. Yudhisthira does not get to heaven to begin with. The story of the dog is introduced when he says that he cannot leave his dog behind and the dog cannot go to heaven. At the end of it, the moral dilemma seems to remain, although it is faced, but is not perhaps entirely solved.

RJ: How do you compare this with the *Bible*? Because in the *Bible*, you also have the return, like in the story of Joseph. It has a moral dimension, but it's very different from the Indian epics. But you also have the concepts of 'forgiveness' and 'retaliation'. Do they exist in the same manner in the Indian epics?

RT: I don't think forgiveness or retaliation are part of the final act. There is little of retaliation, but perhaps something of remorse in the events that circulate around the end of the narratives. Gandhari is angry that there seem to be no solutions. She's deeply unhappy as are others. But I don't recollect much of forgiveness or ... let me put it in another way and say that emotions of forgiveness or retaliation are not the most visible at the end of the narrative. The most visible emotion, it seems to me, was the moral dilemma. But the lack of closure is typical of the epic genre. The *Bible* is somewhat different from the epic in that many stories are concerned more with belief, faith, and the ultimate ethic. These are not the same concerns as those of the societies of epic heroes.

NB: Are these ideas of exile and moral dilemma framed differently in the different versions of the *Ramayana*? Or do they follow the same structure?

RT: No, in the Buddhist version Rama and Sita come back and start ruling. There's no dilemma. We've created the dilemma today by objecting to their being siblings in this version.

NB: What about the northern and southern versions?

RT: Even in the earliest Jaina version of the *Ramayana*, the *Paumachariyam*, there's a bit of a dilemma. It is muted by the fact that the events and relationships are predestined and, therefore, inevitable. It is the conflict between the Vasudevas and the Prativasudevas. It is written into the inevitability of events that Lakshmana, and not Rama, will kill Ravana. Rama is a superior being and, therefore, does not kill. And Sita goes to a nunnery. So the moral dilemma may not be so evident, or at least from what we can make of it.

Tragic Drama in India

RJ: Since we're talking about the *Ramayana* ... this combination of the romance genre with adventure as narrative—is it particular to Indian epics? Do you think we can find the same comparisons in Western narratives?

RT: I think that there are similar comparisons in other, non-Indian epics.

RJ: I think that sometimes they are quite different....

RT: The details of the incidents are certainly different. One of the books that I found helpful in understanding the structures of narratives was by Vladimir Propp, who writes about the morphology of folk tales. I found it helpful many years ago when I first read it. The similarity in the structures was striking although the actual events and persons are different. The basic structure could be that there is a king, who has children, and then there's a stepmother, or there's some agency working against them, so the children are banished, and there's a period of exile, and very often the young woman is kidnapped by an evil person, the hero goes out to fight the person, and so on.

These structures are common not just to India and other parts of the world, but within India, too, in different genres. I mean, look at folk tales. Folk tales are so full of these structures that the narrative becomes almost formulaic in the way in which the story unravels.

NB: Propp maps recurring structures of folktales and sees these as defining the meaning of the folk tales. Ramanujan and Blackburn and others, who emphasize the importance of enunciation, look at the telling of the folk tale, the social context of the telling, the audience, the reception. The bard may narrate a tale in one way at someone's residence, and in another way at the marketplace. He innovates and redefines the structure of the tale according to the audience. He is not just repeating, nor merely condensing and expanding. The form of the telling is defined through the interaction with the audience. So there is a creative refiguration of the structure.

RT: I would go part of the way with that, but I wouldn't call it the 'redefining of the structure'. I think the structure remains fairly similar all the way through. There's certainly variation in the contents. I don't mean changing the story, but changing the kinds of characters, giving them new facets, changing the locations somewhat to make them perhaps more familiar to the audience. This is also a way of appropriating a mainstream narrative. Every part of this country has geographical features that are associated with the epic narratives—the Sita *kund*s (pools), the Ashoka *vatika*s (groves), the Pandu *lena*s (caves). The historian is interested in the point in time when this appropriation of epic narratives takes place. What were these places called prior to the renaming? But I think that if you look at the overall structure, that would tend to be fairly similar.

RJ: But even if the structure is the same, I don't think we can talk about the sense of the tragic in Indian culture as in ancient Greece. According to Vidal-Naquet and Castoriadis, the Athenian tragedy had a political function. Does the tradition of tragic drama have the same political function in India?

RT: I'd like to say a couple of things. One is that, yes, there is a difference. We do not have the tradition of tragic drama as in Greece. Does tragic drama lend itself more closely to political readings, especially when it concerns public figures? There is far less tragic drama in India as drama tends to be more frequently romance. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions, and I think that we haven't looked for political expression in Sanskrit drama, or may be I haven't come across such analyses. Among the plays, the *Mudrarakshasa* has a political intent. I think, for example, that the epic has a different continuity, or rather that there is a difference in the way in which the *Ramayana* is used again and again and again in varying contexts, right up to the present. The structure of the story is the same, except for a little change here and there, but the political dialogue that audiences have had with the *Ramayana*, and the political use that the *Ramayana* has been put to, is quite remarkable. It's used politically in a blatant manner by one political ideology, although the pretence is that it is defending a cultural and religious statement. But we haven't really studied drama from that point of view. We have only just begun to examine the ancient texts in terms of how they were used in their contemporary life and politics, and studies relating the texts to their own and earlier political contexts are now beginning. We haven't produced a Vidal-Naquet!

RJ: Why?

RT: Because those that pride themselves on their traditional learning—and quite justifiably—seem to hesitate to read the text in its historical context. This is something that historians of ancient India are slowly beginning to do.

RJ: But India has produced great historians who are at very high standards of scholarship. Maybe the question has not been asked in the same way....

RT: When we try to explain a text in terms of its own political context, there has been an unfortunate tendency among some to dismiss such explorations as merely the application of Marxism to the text. My study of the variant versions of the story of Shakuntala, which is a preliminary attempt to do that, is not read in most Sanskrit departments, but is being debated in an interesting manner in some Literature departments. One of the more worthwhile conferences on reading the text was organized by the Literature department of Miranda House, a college affiliated to Delhi University. It was an international seminar on the text and associated themes that resulted in a high quality of discussion largely led by teachers of literature.

But I remember a different occasion at a small, in-house seminar at Vagamon in Kerala where a group of historians and literature scholars mainly from Kerala had gathered, and one evening the discussion was on my book *Shakuntala*. It had recently been translated into Malayalam and there had already been discussion on it in literary journals. The evening's discussion went on till midnight in English and Malayalam—the gist of the latter being translated for me. I was struck by how animated it was and what interesting ideas emerged on the interface of history and literature. I realized how important it is to place a text in context, and how the most creative way requires that historians doing this should be able to suggest intellectual explorations. It is not easy to generalize without making this effort. By way of contrast, a well-regarded Hindi critic wrote an extremely lengthy review in a leading Hindi literary journal that condemned every statement in the book, entirely missing the point that even a literary work has some historical context.

This is an aspect of Indian history that has received less attention so far. Questions pertaining to it have begun to be asked, but are proceeding rather slowly. I think part of the reason is that we—historians of early India-—have been so deeply under the shadow of colonial and nationalist interpretation, that such questions, until recently, were not encouraged extensively in relation to Sanskrit literature. There was a set idea about the past and the texts from the past, and one didn't question it too much. Nor is it limited to these influences in India. I once had a very interesting conversation on this with a friend, Frits Staal, who was among the finest of Vedic scholars.

In my recent book on historical traditions of early India, I have a chapter on what are called the *dana-stuti* hymns, which are included in the *Rig Veda*, and are hymns in praise of the *raja* who returns from a successful cattle raid with much booty. The poet writes a hymn in praise of the hero, and claims that he has received from the hero many head of cattle and horses and some slave women—what was regarded as wealth in those days. So there are hymns or verses in praise of such gift-giving heroes scattered in the text. My chapter was entirely on the *dana-stuti* hymns and I was arguing that these can be examined as tiny nuggets of information that perhaps were seeding a pristine historical consciousness even though they were part of a ritual text. On one occasion when Frits was passing through Delhi, I asked him if he had a couple of hours to spare and if he would read my chapter. He read it and then said to me, that these hymns are rarely viewed from this perspective. Such hymns or verses received less attention from Vedic scholars because they had little that was new from either the philological or the ritual point of view. But seeing them in this way was a new perspective. My argument was not that these were historical facts that should be lined up and treated as a historical narrative, but that they were indicative of an attempt to represent the then present and, occasionally, even the past, and were a kind of glimmer that would eventually go into the making of what would become a historical interest in the past. This was admittedly far removed from the actual hymn, but could be seen as potentially suggestive of a narrative of the activities of the chief. There had been an attempt some decades ago to study these hymns as a specific category, but it remained as just a slim collection of hymns with hardly any extensive commentary on them.

But at least Frits Staal and I then had a long discussion about how to read such data and what his reactions were to my ideas. Frankly, barring a few exceptions, this would be difficult to do with some Indian Vedic scholars. There is sometimes among them a diffidence about discussion with those in other disciplines because the wider implications that come from other disciplines may be unfamiliar and, therefore, unacceptable. Or it is more fun to put down the other scholar than to explore an idea, this is perhaps more evident if the other person is a woman!

So it's not just a kind of scholarship, but scholars taking cues from traditional philologists and Orientalists, Indian and European. Their study of these texts focused on language, religion, and ritual and was very valuable but limited to that. For them there would be no implicit political dialogue, and by this I don't mean political in the everyday sense of the word, but rather as it is used to study relationships between groups and the structures of society. This has begun to change with the writing of scholars such as D.D. Kosambi, Charles Malamoud, and R.S. Sharma who asked questions about the nature of the structures of society encapsulated in these texts. There had been the path-breaking work of Marcel Mauss, who referred to both Vedic and epic texts in his study of gift exchange as a form of establishing status in the course of making an exchange of a variety of objects. Similarly, Michael Witzel's study of the possible geographical location of Vedic schools and texts provided a perspective on the spread of Vedic culture.

RJ: What kind of use could Gandhi make, with the exception of rituals and spirituality from the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita* in the context of the Indian independence movement?

RT: He could make use of them in two ways. The obvious one is in the same way that political parties today make use of them. That is, they can legitimize what they're doing by saying, 'It's mentioned in these texts', or 'These texts are where we're getting it from'. So they're using the texts to legitimize contemporary politics, but they're less interested in looking at the texts to see the historical contexts of the time when they were composed, so that they can be read as having a point of view. The absence of context allows the text to be read in any which way. To relate it to a context requires a different kind of historical imagination, that has so far been less evident although it is now becoming more visible. Of course, none of this filters through to those who in the present day make public statements claiming knowledge—politicians and such like—and who, barring a few exceptions, know little about the past culture and civilization of Indian society: hence their hesitation and on occasion inability to protect and defend the values that matter. But they seek legitimacy from what they call tradition.

The legitimacy, however, is tied to what one can extract from the text. For instance, ethical and moral ideas can carry a universal message, but they are rooted in the kind of society that gave rise to them. This connection is not made at the popular level and such values are treated as being liberated from time and space and having no context. But the context is important to historians and this perhaps makes them hesitate to use the text as an all-purpose source of legitimacy. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, speaks of universal ethics and a moral code, but the context it is given is that of an immense clan conflict, and the endorsing of *svadharma* (one's positioning in the social code), initially relates to that context although it subsequently becomes universal. The historian's take on the text is bound to be different from that of Gandhi. Where actions seem a little out of context, they have to be probed. This results these days in the inevitable confrontation between those who have studied the texts and those who hold forth, authoritatively, more often not through having studied the text, but from what they have heard said about it, or from having read the text without seeing it in context. Gandhi and a few others were exceptions as they did read and think about the texts they were referring to.

In a conversation with me, Romi Khosla used a felicitous phrase to describe the difference. He spoke of 'experienced history' and 'heard history'. The first is when the historian comes face-to-face with his data, learns to understand it, and goes through the various stages of historical investigation and analysis, before making a statement. The second refers to the person who merely hears what is said, does not do any historical investigation himself, but pronounces on what happened in the past. The second category of person is usually the one that uses the past indiscriminately to legitimize his activities in the present. But the difference between this kind of person and Gandhi is that Gandhi was not using these texts to legitimize his own present, he was using them as a source of universal ethics.

RJ: Is this legitimization done mostly through the reading of the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita* or by going back to a text like the *Arthashastra*?

RT: Who uses the *Arthashastra*?

RJ: That's what I am asking! Who uses the *Arthashastra*? Is there an interest in the *Arthashastra*?

RT: Not so much, because the *Arthashastra* is suggesting a political economy that has little to do with democracy. Its ideal is a centralized bureaucracy, with a powerful ruler, and an array of functionaries with roles that are precisely indicated. It's not a document propagating democracy. There is no place in it for a representation of the citizens. I dare say there would be prime ministers that would happily assume the position of power that Kautilya gives to the monarch, but that would not be possible if the democracy functions properly. And he does qualify it by speaking of a range of ministers or supervisors of the administration, who advise the king and on whose efficiency the king is dependent for the administration of the kingdom. It could be examined, as some have tried to do, as a guide to some forms of government, but even this idea has not gone much further.

Having said that, let's not forget that the *Arthashastra* is a normative text—it is describing what the author believes should be an ideal projection of the functioning of a polity and its administration. It is a kind of blueprint of how the ideal kingdom should function. It is not a description of actual functioning. Let's not forget the context. It is written in a period when chiefships were being swallowed up by kingdoms, the *gana-sanghas* of earlier times were petering out, and at the time when a revised version was written, their termination is recorded in inscriptions. So the *Arthashastra* is legitimizing kingship as superior to other systems and is dismissing the viability of the *gana-sanghas*, about which it is uncomplimentary, and these were the nearest thing we had in ancient times to a system that would not have been averse to some political representation, even if only of the elite.

But what is worth thinking about is whether there was and is a preference for quoting the religious texts from the past among the public figures of our times. It was rare for those in politics to refer to the *Arthashastra*, even when speaking of governance. The discovery of the manuscript of the *Arthashastra* dates to the beginning of the twentieth century so it is a late arrival among the major texts of ancient times. It stands out as a text on polity that gives centrality to reasoned, rational thinking, to critical inquiry. Kautilya includes the Vedic corpus among the four subjects of importance, but emphasizes the others, these being the more rationally oriented schools of philosophy (Samkhya, Yoga, and Lokayata), economics and politics. All these are to be investigated through a critical inquiry to ascertain what was acceptable or not in them.

None of the three texts we have referred to supported democracy, which is understandable since they were written at a time when democracy was not being thought of. But what remains curious is that nationalists should pick on the religious texts, rather than those supporting reasoned thinking and pragmatism. This was probably because the socio-religious revival of the nineteenth century was also entwined with ideas of nationalism and the larger number of nationalists were of the upper castes and, therefore, more familiar with religious texts. This would also tie in with the idea of Indian civilization being defined as Sanskrit-speaking and Hindu in religion, not to mention that the two-nation theory would have further emphasized the centrality of religious texts.

The *Arthashastra* is occasionally referred to in present times, and interestingly also by those associated with the corporates and politically influential business houses, for whom special predigested editions of the text are prepared and published! Some are trying to cull ideas on *dharma* from the *Mahabharata* to juxtapose them to current practices. Such references are possibly more an attempt to find something in the early Indian tradition that might give legitimacy to contemporary ideas, and hence the reference to the essentials of governance as laid down in the *Arthashastra*. One would have thought that Todar Mal and Abu'l Fazl would be more appropriate. The *Arthashastra* doesn't, of course, have the emotional appeal of a *Ramayana*. The epics being more accessible are familiar, and the moral dilemmas raised in them have some immediacy if they are not brushed aside. But by and large that is not why they are referred to and what we need is a good critical inquiry into such texts—what Kautilya recommends as *anvikshaki*.

RJ: So they cannot make an ideological weapon out of the *Arthashastra*, but they can do it by using the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

RT: Yes, although attempts are made to use it ideologically. There was a rather ahistorical TV serial called *Chanakya* portraying Chanakya, also known as Kautilya, as the great *brahmana* defending India from the Greeks campaigning in the north-west, and as being the real power behind the making of the Mauryan Empire. This, of course, has limited validity in Mauryan history.

But the *Bhagavad Gita* is a text that can go easily with the politics of conservatism.

NB: If you're talking of the political use of a text, that is, what does a text become in practice today, then possibly the two most important texts to consider are the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* ... aren't they?

RJ: It's not only a question of bureaucracy or administration, but also of political legitimacy.

NB: The thing is that in the writings on the political use of texts, including your articles, the effort has been to show how these texts legitimize political practice. But what happens when these texts are being reread and reinterpreted in radically political ways, and different ways? The *Ramayana* of today or the *Bhagavad Gita* of today would be different from earlier versions of these texts ... in your essay 'Syndicated Hinduism' and in your *Ramayana* essays ... what you're looking at is this political appropriation of the text. It is not as if there is an originary text that is being directly used—without reworking—for the politics of legitimation.

RT: The political appropriation claims to be a reading of the text applied to contemporary times. One of the reasons why this becomes easy is that few people today read the original texts written in languages no longer routinely current. Most of the politicians who quoted the *Ramayana* at the time of the Babri Masjid conflict had not read it in the original which was the version that was at issue in locating the birthplace. They had heard about locations, incidents, or statements as hearsay. So it's easy for a political party to claim that it is acting in conformity with the events and values as given in a text, since neither they nor the major part of the audience they address have read the text! That's the tragedy: that the audience being addressed, and being influenced by those kind of politics, is less familiar with the actual texts and more with what they have heard, the comics they have read as children, or the versions they have seen on TV and the cinema, or what they have heard in popular retellings. The media creates and propagates its own versions of the texts in a new idiom. This happens all the time with popular texts, but these versions cannot be taken as the original since they can and do differ. Such changes in the form and presentation of the texts intended for popular consumption have been part of the biography of each of these texts. This keeps the text alive as well as socially and politically relevant, but not faithfully reflecting the original. Every text has a life of its own and that is not the issue here. What we are discussing is the particular appropriation of a particular religious text for current political purposes.

RJ: My reference to the *Arthashastra* is because there is no appeal to the divine agency, but you have this appeal to divine agency in the *Bhagavad Gita*. So it makes it easier for the use of some political parties.

RT: The *Ramayana* and the *Gita* are more familiar texts. Who in a village has heard of the *Arthashastra*? But they've all heard of the *Gita* and the *Ramayana*. So they are using something that is familiar and revered, reading it in a way that they want to read it, and are trying to convince the audience that their reading is the single, acceptable one.

VI

Shakuntala and *Somanatha*

The Historian's Impulse

RJ: Can we move to *Somanatha* and *Shakuntala*? Neeladri, would you like to start?

NB: Sure. Romila, let me begin with a question about the historian's choice. Both these books—*Somanatha* and *Shakuntala*—have been widely read and politically important, and in both you deploy innovative narrative strategies. In both you develop your narrative by exploring multiple representations, in one case of an event and in the other of a literary personage. What made you choose the objects of your study and the narrative strategy? What did you wish to do by counterpoising the plural narratives, something you had done in your earlier work on many *Ramayanas*? I am interested in knowing about the relationship between the intention of the historian and the way she defines her object of study and narrative strategy. I also want to know how a historian's project gets shaped over time—the initial impulse and the subsequent reworking of the project as the research proceeds.

RT: Well, let's start with *Shakuntala* first because the impulses were rather different in the two. I had written some essays in the late 1970s and 1980s on the various versions of the *Ramayanas*, which were published in the 1980s, and I was struck by how different the Buddhist and the Jaina versions of the narrative are from that of the Valmiki, and from the later medieval *Ramayanas* as well. My thoughts on the broad subject of theme and variation were taking shape.

So when I was asked by a feminist publisher, Kali for Women (as it was then called), if I would do a lecture to commemorate their tenth anniversary, I was initially hesitant as I had not worked on feminist history. I asked myself whether I could take a narrative from the past which has to do with social perceptions of women, and see whether, in the various ways in which it was treated in later times up to the present, it had changed, and if so, then how. The narrative that came to my mind was the story of Shakuntala, because it's very popular, it's well-known, and there were many versions. And having worked on many versions of the story of the *Ramayana*, I was ready to look at this narrative and enquire similarly into the historical reasons for its many versions. The attempt was not merely to record different versions and show why they are different. I had two other intentions. One was to see how closely the particular version reflected the historical context of the time when it was written. I was struck even on a preliminary reading by how differently the same story had been treated in the *Mahabharata* version and in the drama of Kalidasa. My intention was to see how the central character, Shakuntala, was perceived as a woman in different periods of history under different historical circumstances—in the epic, in classical drama of the Gupta period, as entertainment in a regional court of the eighteenth century, and in translations into German and English. The other reason was to ask the question whether these versions reflect diverse perceptions of a woman, well placed in society, faced with an event that forces a choice on her, and the social values involved in her choice and in reactions to it. I was interested in the reception of the story among audiences of different periods of the past. I suppose that up to a point, this question also reflected the fact of my being a woman of the twentieth century.

So I was attempting a little bit of feminist history in response to the complaint of my friend Kumkum Roy that I never wrote from a feminist perspective or on feminist themes. That in part led me to select this subject. I was also going back to an earlier interest of mine. Long ago I had been a student of literature. My first degree was in literature. And reading literature has been an important part of my life. I then thought that it would be rather fun to do an exercise on the interface between history and literature. Even until recently we historians have used literary texts for snippets of historical information that could be included as data in a historical study. We have tended not to look at the text as a historical artefact in itself. So this is what I was trying to explore.

I found as I went along, reading the texts chronologically, that the versions of the story differed, and that perhaps the differences could be linked to the historical context of the respective societies for whom they were written. There's the epic version from the *Mahabharata*, that has a clan society as its background. There are places and statements where the behaviour and speech is as it would be in such a society. Then there is Kalidasa's play *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, which is essentially a courtly play, and has all the trappings of court literature: superb poetry in excellent Sanskrit, the play of emotions, and a special idiom. The audience would be different from those that heard the epic version and so too would be the authors. I took a third example written in Braj-bhasha, a form of Hindi common to some literature in the late medieval courtly tradition, but of a subsidiary court, and written in a down-to-earth style, based partially on the Kalidasa play, but not fully so. There were at least these three points in history where the text, the narrative itself, is presented in a different form, and I was interested in seeing what the context of that form was, and why it was different.

A further change comes with the translation by William Jones of the Kalidasa play that introduces it to the European audience, and he mentions that he has deleted the passages that he thought were erotic, because the manners and morals of English readers would find them unacceptable. This translation was in turn translated into German and had an enormous impact on German Romanticism. Goethe said of it, 'I name thee Shakuntala and all is said', a comment that has been repeated *ad nauseam*. It swept through German Romanticism, with Shakuntala being described as 'the child of nature'.

Then we come back to India in the nineteenth century, when the Sanskritist Monier Williams, was asked to prepare a text version of the play to be used for teaching Sanskrit at college level. He complained of too many erotic passages. These he deleted and finally produced a version that he thought would be suitable.

By the end of the nineteenth century, German Romanticism and Orientalism had given a focus to the play. Shakuntala was the ideal Indian woman, projected as somewhat shy and hesitant, puzzled by the king rejecting her after his assurances of his love for her. A major Indian literary figure reacted in a way that encapsulates the view of Oriental scholarship coupled with how she was perceived by Indian sentiment already influenced by some Orientalist ideas.

With Tagore the reading of the text takes another turn. Tagore was critical of nationalism up to a point, but was nevertheless a nationalist. His reading of these texts was partly to understand what he regarded as his own intellectual tradition, and partly the interpretation of the Orientalists and the British commentators. His essays on Shakuntala suggest his views. He writes of how the love of Shakuntala and Dushyanta turns from an initially base physical passion, symbolized in their *gandharva* marriage, based on mutual choice not involving rituals or witnesses, to an eventually higher quality of love that Tagore sees as a spiritual union after a period of separation—a kind of *tapasya* (austerity)—that enabled them to discover spiritual love. Finally they are reunited. This view, it seemed to me, echoed what was being said at the time about erotic manifestations in other aspects of Indian culture. Was eroticism or the erotic a form of spirituality; was it a sublimation of the erotic and symbolic of the human soul seeking union with the universal soul. I found I had to convince myself that I should explore it further and in the context of nationalism and culture.

The paintings and oleographs of Raja Ravi Varma of approximately the same time became immensely popular and established a recognizable style. They were picked up rather too easily by subsequent calendar art. The 1940s saw some films made on the story, in one of which M.S. Subbulakshmi sings her way through the episodes with the Botanical Gardens as a substitute for the forest; in another there is a strong dialogue in the last scene where Shakuntala ticks off Dushyanta for his treatment of her when she first came to the court. This I thought was an unexpected intervention almost of feminism. All I could discover was that the dialogue for the film was written by a poet who, I was told, may have been part of the IPTA movement in Bombay that had a radical approach to arts and literature: hence the spirited dialogue of Shakuntala.

Even more pertinent was another film made in 1985, *Anantayatra*. This is a hilarious take on the story where a businessman in Bombay happens to visit an old Parsi friend, who asks him to open a cupboard in the room, which he does. It turns out to be an entry into the past. He had expressed a wish to meet Shakuntala, and as he steps into the cupboard she appears. There's a romp in the woods, and eventually he invites her to come with him to his real world, and she readily agrees. So he takes her back to his flat, and then he doesn't know what to do, because she questions him endlessly about why he is living the way he is, so different from life in the *ashrama* where she had come from. I found this fascinating in terms of someone trying to put the earlier text into the context of contemporary India.

The end result of this exploration of a literary subject was that one observed virtually the same narrative changing at different periods of history, as also the perception of the woman Shakuntala, the changes closely reflecting the contemporary context. The structure remained much the same, the basic story was virtually the same barring a few alterations. Depending on the new author, the new audience, the new function of the text, the content changed a little to accommodate the new requirements. That comes through clearly in all of these different versions.

This interface between literature and history did not require the historian to comment on whether the narrative was factually correct, for the question of historicity was set aside. Obviously, this was not the required question since the narrative was fiction. Nor was there a requirement to stay close to the original version, again because it was fiction. Nevertheless, each version of the story was giving a flavour of the period in which it was written, and the purpose for which it was written. Therefore, the epic version is very different from the Kalidasa version, and this in turn is different from the medieval Braj-bhasha version, which is different from the modern takes on the text. And so it was really at these levels that I was considering the texts of Shakuntala reflecting varying contexts.

But apart from the texts I was also searching for any differences in the way the central character is presented. The story is seemingly the same, but the impression one has of Shakuntala is varied in its nuances in these different versions. The feisty woman of the epic becomes the more submissive woman of courtly culture.

NB: You say that in most of the versions the essential structure of the story remains the same. But does it really? It is clear from your book, *Shakuntala*, that the story in its varied versions was structured within different tropes—the tragic, the heroic, the comic. The figure of Shakuntala comes to embody different things—she is de-eroticized by William Jones, transformed into a figure of nature by Goethe, seen as the personification of spirituality by Rabindranath Tagore, reinscribed with eroticism by Ravi Varma, and imbued with an assertive feminine voice in a modern film.

It seems that the structure in the different versions are only seemingly similar. The core ingredients of the story are shared, but they are connected differently in the different versions, to produce varying effects, meanings, and emotions. Wouldn't the meaning of a specific narrative depend on the particular way it is narrativized, the mode of narration?

Going back to the question I was interested in, in terms of the plurality of versions. What comes through in both the books is your interest in demonstrating that there is no one universal version. You are almost saying, 'Look, there is no unitary story, no essential account, and no authentic version against which we judge the false ones'. The question of method that you seem to be posing for the historian in these two books is this: what does the historian do when she is confronted with many different stories of the same event, and changing representations of the event over time? Your answer appears to be that the historian should not merely look at the facticity of the events within the story, or try to show which version is more authentic. The task should rather be to unpack the narratives to understand the politics of their production and the vision of the world they open up. That is, the historian needs to understand the audience the text was written for, the way it was received at the time of its production, and the reason why one version gets canonized. You also seem to be saying that to understand these texts we have to see not just what they say about society, but why at different times the same kinds of stories are narrated in different ways, and how they, therefore, express something about the society in which they are produced and canonized.

In exploring multiple narratives in these two books, are you trying to do different things?

RT: In the book on Shakuntala I am trying to show that changing authors and audiences reflect a relationship with different social categories. In the twentieth century the Kalidasa play is treated as a literary classic and its values are universalized. It has remained so far a text familiar to the contemporary elite. Yes, I'm doing a different thing in *Somanatha*, which is not so much the presenting of different versions as showing how one event has been differently written about. That is, that there wasn't one story which then got differently expressed; but that there was one event whose history was either ignored or was later written about differently.

NB: In *Shakuntala*, it's one figure—the product of a literary imagination—who is differently written about. That is....

RT: It's reports of the story. It's more than the story. It's more than the figure; it's also the story.

RJ: I think in *Somanatha* you're much more interested in the present use or misuse of the story....

RT: That was not my initial reason for researching the topic, but yes, it ends with that concern since that is the contemporary use to which the event is being subjected. I had originally stopped with the martyrdom of the Bohra Mohammad defending Somanatha against the attack by the Delhi Sultan, but was then asked by colleagues why the event had become central to current communal politics, so it was necessary for me to investigate that. This took me to the colonial reading of the event and its misuse in the present. But my research on the subject did not start with that question. It began when I realized that most texts that referred to the place did not refer to the event, and the one category of texts that did refer to the event had widely differing versions of what had actually been desecrated. Previous historians had closed the story with this set of texts, but I began to discover that there were many other kinds of sources, all of them published and well known, that provide evidence of other happenings at Somanatha. So I decided to pursue them.

Somanatha and Communal Historical Writing

RJ: Could you say a little more about *Somanatha* and its relationship with your reading of communal historical writing?

RT: It has a relationship, although my interest in it didn't begin that way. It began with a seminar where we were talking about sacred geography, and everybody had their pet mountain, river, temple, and place of pilgrimage. I suddenly thought that I had never really worked on any place of pilgrimage or religious space as such. What would it be like? And then it struck me. Why don't I just look at what has already been written about Somanatha since the raid on the temple by Mahmud seemed to have become such a pivotal event in modern history? More so since it is talked about so much in the political dialogue of today, especially with the BJP taking out a *ratha yatra*, literally, a journey by chariot, from Somanatha to Ayodhya, and the eventual destruction of the Babri Masjid. It started, therefore, with just an attempt to assess the historical writing on the event at Somanatha. And then when I discovered as my research proceeded that so many sources had not been consulted, and that these changed our understanding of the event, then my direction of research also changed somewhat.

I had only a vague idea of what sources there would be beyond the ones that are constantly quoted. The prominent among these are the chronicles of the sultanate courts, and other texts in Persian written after the event. To my immense surprise and delight, I discovered as I went along pursuing clues that there is a range of relevant texts of various kinds, mostly in Sanskrit, such as inscriptions in Sanskrit and the Jaina chronicles and biographies of the kings of Gujarat. These were all published texts and well known within their individual areas of study, but had been ignored in the context of Somanatha. I wondered why they had not been consulted, leave alone being collated, in writing the history of Somanatha since they referred to it as both a temple and a location.

Thinking about it I realized that there were at least two reasons for this. One was that in the colonial periodization that we have accepted, the Hindu period ends in 1000 AD or at 1200, so it is assumed that texts relevant to history cease to be written in Sanskrit after this, and literary sources are then written only in Persian, the language associated with the 'Muslim/medieval' period. But, of course, as we know, some of the fundamental texts on Sanskrit culture, philosophy, social institutions, and associated with Hinduism, were written precisely in this period, in the second millennium AD. So I should not have been surprised by the variety and extent of sources available in Sanskrit for this period. The second reason, of course, was that it was assumed by historians that Mahmud destroyed the temple and, therefore, there was no need to search for more evidence about what could have happened to it subsequently; and that the destruction of the temple would have ended the importance of Somanatha as a place of pilgrimage and a commercial centre. However, the temple continued to be used in worship and was receiving grants until the fifteenth century.

I began with reading the texts that are always quoted. I noticed a curious feature that all these medieval period texts contradict each other when describing what was actually destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni when he raided the temple at Somanatha. Was it an image? Was it a stone or a metal image? Was it an anthropomorphic image in the shape of a human being or was it aniconic? Was it the image of a god? Was it an iconic symbol? Every text gives a different description in accordance with one of these diverse forms. One account had a fascinating description of how the icon, most likely a *lingam*, was suspended in the air, because it was made of metal and there was a magnet above it so it rose above the ground and there it remained. I wondered what kind of magnet would be required to suspend an entire icon and the technology required in its placement. That intrigued me.

Then gradually, as I proceeded with reading the sources, I realized that there were a number of other sources, mainly in Sanskrit, but some in other languages, and in traditions that historians of medieval times and those writing on medieval history in our day, didn't often refer to in their histories. For example, there were inscriptions in Sanskrit that mention how the temple was reconstructed in the twelfth century by a particular king of the Chalukya dynasty of Gujarat, and how the chief priest of the temple claimed that he was responsible for persuading the king to reconstruct the temple. There are inscriptions where reference is made to the local *rajas* who looted the pilgrims coming to worship at the major temples of the region and to what one suspects was the exasperation of the Chalukya kings with this situation. Another inscription refers to an attack on the town of Somanatha by a Delhi sultan, and to the death of Mohammad, the Bohra, who was defending Somanatha against the army of the sultan.

Among the many inscriptions, one is particularly significant. This was a bilingual inscription in Sanskrit and Arabic dating to the thirteenth century. The Sanskrit version was quite lengthy. It was issued by a Persian trader called Nur-ud-din Firoz and refers to his commercial relationships with the local gentry of Somanatha. The local governor, appointed by the Chalukya/Solanki kings then ruling over Gujarat, in consultation with the town council consisting of the resident Hindu elite, all agreed to allot him land for building a mosque and for maintaining it. We are told that some of the land thus donated came from the estates of the Somanatha temple and other temples in the vicinity.

I realized then that the Somanatha temple continued to own property whereas according to the chronicles of the sultans it had been destroyed. And that is the rhetoric of today's politics, that it was completely destroyed. If so then how did it get to own property? The property was extensive enough to need a committee to administer it and to donate some part of it for the setting up of a mosque! Had the temple been destroyed by Mahmud, and had it already owned landed property, then those administering this property must have become active very quickly in re-establishing the claim to that property. Or else the property was acquired in record time, and that would suggest that the temple may not have been destroyed, since the property would be acquired in the name of the temple. The local administration was clearly not hostile to the idea of some of this property being used to build a mosque. Surely, if the temple had been destroyed, there would have been some objection to building a mosque in its vicinity and not so long after Mahmud's raid.

And then there was another set of inscriptions, of about a hundred years later, again by the chief priest of this temple, saying that various other temples were built at Somanatha from the monies that had been collected by donations and by the offerings of visiting pilgrims.

It is apparent that a couple of hundered years after Mahmud's raid, there was a healthy trade between the local Hindu and Jaina traders and the Persian and Arab traders. Nur-ud-din states that he is from Hormuz. According to the Jaina chronicle, one among many Jaina writings on Gujarat during this period, the Chalukya king, Kumarapala, renovated the temple that was in a dilapidated condition. This was because of neglect by the wicked ministers and weathering caused by sea spray hitting the temple wall since it was located on the shore. There is no mention of Mahmud's raid. At the consecration of the rebuilt temple, the Jaina minister goes into the sanctum with the king. When the king asks which is the greatest religion, the Jaina minister turns to the image of Shiva and prays to the deity to manifest himself. Shiva does so and proclaims the Jaina religion to be the best. This, of course, is fantasy. But the point is that it is written in the Jaina tradition and is read and believed by many of that tradition. It's a chronicle of the Gujarat kings as viewed from the Jaina perspective. I thought it strange that none of these sources mention Mahmud's looting of the temple. Were they embarrassed to do so? Or was the event forgotten by now? Or were there other reasons?

These conflicting versions suggest that, although the icon was destroyed, the temple was probably looted, but perhaps not destroyed. There was far more to be got from looting a temple than destroying it. That the temple was not destroyed, but was rebuilt, is also evident from the archaeological excavations that were carried out at the site in 1950. Yet the chronicles of the sultanates state that from time to time, the army of a particular sultan went to Somanatha, raided the temple, and converted it into a mosque. Presumably after the first occasion, they were destroying a mosque each time!

When I first presented the paper at the seminar on 'Sacred Geography', I stopped at the point where the armies of later sultans were said to be raiding Somanatha. But from the perspective of how this history continues to be treated, the next important question was what was the colonial take on this event, and, linked to this was the theory of how a Hindu trauma resulted from the event. This was stated by colonial historians and repeated by nationalists. It was said to be such a deep-seated trauma that from the time of the raid, the Hindus hated the Muslims, and that this was one of the reasons for the perpetual antagonism between the two. The many sources that I consulted do not mention any trauma. So where did this idea come from? I began to look at British references to Somanatha. It turns out that Lord Ellenborough in the early nineteenth century commanded his general who was campaigning in Afghanistan that on his return he was to go to Ghazni and bring back the gates of the mausoleum of Sultan Mahmud, because those gates had been stolen by him from the Somanatha temple. When the gates were brought back, they were found, on stylistic grounds, to have been made probably in Egypt, and certainly had nothing to do with the Somanatha temple.

Meanwhile, the return of the gates became a big political issue in Britain. An extended debate in the House of Commons led to arguments for and against Ellenborough. Was he fanning Hindu–Muslim antagonism by asking for the gates? If the Hindus harboured a trauma vis-à-vis the Muslims regarding Mahmud's raid on Somanatha, the issue of the gates would further that trauma by saying that they were from the original Somanatha temple. The idea of a distinct Hindu trauma began in that debate in the House of Commons. And then, of course, it was taken up, and the Persian chronicles were heavily quoted and believed to be correct in what they say. The Sanskrit sources were not quoted, since the historians had not cited them.

The raid on Somanatha enters Indian national politics in the early twentieth century by which time the ideologies of Hindu and Muslim nationalisms, with their accompanying antagonism, had been established. A nationalist leader, K.M. Munshi, who was the education minister in the Congress government after Independence, with Nehru as the prime minister, insisted that the temple at Somanatha that was now derelict, this time for lack of patronage, had to be rebuilt. A dome had been constructed over one part of it in the late medieval period and its identity was no longer that of a temple. The ASI, in charge of historical monuments, objected to the excavation and removal of the ruins of the old temple since it had been declared a protected monument. But Munshi insisted and asked that the Government of India fund the rebuilding. Nehru firmly rejected this demand arguing that the government was a secular one and would not rebuild structures for religious use, and that Munshi had to get private funding to do so. So a private trust was established to get donations and this trust financed the rebuilding.

The final act, or what we think at the moment might be the final act, was when members of the Sangh Parivar led by the BJP tore down the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. This act they sought to justify by referring to it as avenging Mahmud's raid on Somanatha as well as the claim that the mosque stood on the site of a temple to Rama that had been destroyed. Revenge was being taken for that raid a thousand years later. It became a major political slogan in the next election. Is this to be taken as history, given the reconstruction of event and location that I have summarized, or is this the manipulation of history for political purposes? Should the historian stay silent or should the historian question the justification given as a form of historical interpretation?

My intention was to show that when one analyses an event from a historical viewpoint, and uses a variety of sources, the result can be something very different from the way in which it was seen a hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago, when the full range of sources was not utilized, but instead sources were cherry-picked in order to support an ideological argument. So it's essential that one does ensure that one has examined all the possible sources. This is an example of the politics of today trying to exploit a certain narrow, incomplete history of a past event and make it into a political issue of our times. In pursuing this research, I was once again made aware of the fact that I was questioning a colonial reading of a historical event.

The Rashomon Effect

NB: If you are exploring multiple narratives of the same event—the Rashomon Effect in a sense—and telling us about the many different ways in which an event has been perceived historically, why are you then posing the argument in terms of the 'whole truth' versus the 'part truth', 'all the evidence' versus 'part of the evidence'? This means that there is a singular truth which needs to be recovered in some way. Is this framing not problematic?

RT: No. That's not what I was trying to do. First of all, I never used the word 'truth'.

NB: Okay, well, I'll come to the question of truth later. But you said 'incomplete'. You said 'narrow'.

RT: 'Incomplete', yes.

NB: So what is complete?

RT: A historian tries to consult as many sources as possible and lends completeness as much as is possible to the ensuing interpretation and explanation. When clearly only a few sources are consulted and others are known, but left out, the reading is incomplete. What I'm trying to argue is that traditionally people have heard only one storyteller. What I'm trying to do is not to complete the picture, but to say that there are many storytellers, and I am referring here only to those we consider reliable, and that we have to ask what is the story they are telling and what is their purpose in telling their version of the story? I am not arguing that every storyteller is telling a true story because I am not searching for something called 'the truth'. I am looking again at variations in the story which do two things: they provide another version of how one looks at the given version without claiming that it is the true version to the exclusion of the others; and furthermore, I am suggesting that perhaps some statement from the variant version if reliable, may provide evidence that helps in constructing a more complete picture.

There's a trader who's interested in his commercial relations with local traders, and he's interested in setting up a mosque which is going to facilitate his trade because he has seamen coming from Persia and they need a location to identify with and a place to pray. And he's obviously in a close commercial relationship with the local traders, the elite, and those controlling the property of the temples. So that is one version. It is not even a version of the event, but of the situation in Somanatha. In fact, the end of my story could be that the event is unimportant, but that is not what I am arguing. I'm looking at the location for historical interventions and trying to understand the context of an important text. It tells us of one set of relationships, but there are others.

Then there is the contention between the Jainas and the Shaivas over who was responsible for persuading the king to rebuild the temple, and who was responsible for the renovation of the temple. There's another kind of politics both explicit and implicit in this. And this conflict, as we know, is not restricted to Somanatha as there are references to it from other parts of the country as well.

Then what I forgot to mention, because it is not strictly located in Somanatha, is the collection of the many folk legends and ballads on Ghazi Miyan, supposed to be a nephew of Mahmud, but who we know never existed. In some of these stories, unconnected with Somanatha, Mahmud is a benign figure who readily removes obstacles if appealed to. Mahmud, as an obstacle remover, is, I think, an ironic twist to the image of someone who in other texts is going about destroying images in temples. The possible fabrication of Ghazi Miyan and his link with Mahmud is another perspective that called for research and this has recently been done.

I'm not saying that there is a single truth behind all this. What I'm saying is that one event may be viewed in different ways. It may not even be referred to. But it is interesting to try explain why it is not referred to or why it is referred to perhaps in an indirect way. This may mean a different perception of the event, perhaps even of its relative unimportance, compared to the importance given to it in our times for reasons quite other than the original.

It could have been thought to be embarrassing, or unimportant; or it could be just part of what happens in Kaliyuga—in times of distress when social codes are turned upside down; or perhaps the memory of the event had receded in the course of other events that were more imminently important in certain sources, although it continued to be written about in the Persian texts. One can also ask why this last category of sources is maintaining what appears to be in comparison with other sources, an exaggerated account of the event? Was it perhaps in order to eulogize both Mahmud and Islam? There are many questions still to be asked and answered.

In some ways I suppose I am harking back to Fernand Braudel's idea of the three contexts that govern the time of an event—the immediate, the wider, and the long duration. Mahmud's raid has had many points of context in time, and that is not unusual, but it has also had a lengthy duration!

My interest was in looking at all these different versions, being aware that the historian cannot claim to establish the 'truth' of what happened or assess which version is the true one. But the historian can try to explain why particular versions were recorded and why these led to the politics of their times, and of today. That's the position. An analysis of this theme would in itself suggest that some explanations would be more plausible than others.

RJ: What interests me in your standpoint as an Indian historian is your intervention in the present time against the rise of communal ideologies or communal history writing in India today. If you were an Iranian historian, you would have a different standpoint. First of all, you might not have felt the necessity of writing a book on Somanatha, because Somanatha is actually an event which is utterly out of the Iranian psyche.

RT: It's unimportant and possibly unknown to many non-Indians.

RJ: It's not relevant at all in the Iranian context.

RT: I suspect it was so in a major part of the Indian subcontinent in previous centuries. I am also puzzled by the silence of historians over references by Kalhana in the *Rajatarangini* to an eleventh-century king of Kashmir, Harshadeva, who looted temples and uprooted the gods in search of wealth. Kalhana calls him a *turushka* (Turk), but today we prefer to remain silent about such instances. He belonged to the same century as Mahmud. I find it curious that the Cholas, for instance, who were contemporaries of Mahmud and were the dominant political power in the peninsula with extensive links to south-east Asia, seem to have been unaware of, or unconcerned with, contemporary events in the north-western part of the subcontinent. Few associated these events with anything beyond the familiar raids from across the borders of north-western India.

RJ: Absolutely. So we come back to our initial point in this conversation, which is the present where we stand and look back at the past.

RT: Yes. This is one instance where, when I finally put the book together, I was so surprised at the way the history unfolded that I became aware yet again of the need to point to the intention of communal historical writing.

RJ: I find it so interesting that Muslims around the world today don't even know where Somanatha is. They've never heard of Somanatha. It's completely out of their historical mindsets. It's very interesting.

RT: And that would probably have been so in many parts of India as well, if there hadn't been the debate in the British House of Commons and the imprint of British colonial historiography. It would have been just another Yavana raider looting temples in the north west.

The Centrality of the Event

NB: In what you say, I read a very radical implication about the notion of truth. I'm not so sure whether you'd be willing to agree to that. What you are saying is that in looking at events like the destruction of the temple at Somanatha, the critical question for the historian is not whether this event happened or not. What happened at that time comes to us embedded in a variety of material sources which tell us different stories. Therefore, the historian has to look at how the event was represented, and what it tells us about the society and people that produced these representations. The historian has to also look at the implications of those representations for the society of that time as well as our own.

RT: One can dismiss this history by saying that if there was no event I would not be researching it. But to go back, the issue is not that for the historian the centrality of the event happening is the most important....

NB: That's the implication of your argument....

RT: No, that is not so. The book is assuming that the event took place. That there was, as many of the sources state....

NB: Some versions, the Jaina version, for instance, don't say that.

RT: Some versions don't say that, and I'm, therefore, interested in why those versions don't say that. I'm much more interested in the fact that there are these different versions of what might have happened. Some people remember, in the sense that they were personally not present, but that it is something they think happened and should be recorded. Some people forget or are uninterested in reading the record. Some chroniclers writing in Persian, remember, in the sense that it takes the form of their continuing to record it, to narrate it, even to embellish it, to fantasize it, or change it. So one goes into the reasons why they are insisting on doing so and making a big issue out of this event, whereas for the Jainas and some others, it seems to have been not worth mentioning or only in passing, else they knew nothing about it even though they lived in that region.

NB: So you're saying that whether it happened or not is insignificant.

RT: No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that what interests me is why in a particular set of sources it is recorded as having happened, and in other sources it was not thought necessary to record it, though they're referring to the same place.

NB: So it's how it is being talked about, how it is being written about … the cultural politics of recording and forgetting, of foregrounding or understating….

RT: Yes.

NB: In a sense—as I mentioned earlier—what is seemingly at play in such plural recounting is the Rashomon Effect. But I think there is a profound difference. In the film *Rashomon*, the certainty of truth is brought under question because of a conflict of individual viewpoints—four different people tell the story of a Samurai's killing differently. In *Somanatha*, you are dealing with genres of literature, and patterns of collective—not individual—representation. Akira Kurosawa raises questions of individual motive and intention behind the contradictory retelling of the story. By unsettling the idea of truth, Kurosawa makes the audience doubt the humanity of the individuals who recount the story so differently, and faith in humanity is reaffirmed only at the end. In contrast, your telling of the different versions of the Somanatha story helps us understand the wider politics of representation, and the fact that this politics is linked to the constitution of social, not individual, memory. And finally, while *Rashomon* does not move beyond the focus on the individual, *Somanatha* explores how particular representations can acquire social currency, become popular, and come to be accepted as authentic. What I found particularly interesting is your argument that the idea of 'Hindu hurt' in relation to the raid of Somanatha was a product of colonial discourse.

So, therefore, it's not simply a question of a plurality of interpretations....

RT: No, it's not simply a question of plurality of interpretation, but of the politics of interpretation. And I am using politics not in the narrow sense, but in the wider sense of intentions and explanations both of the past and the present.

NB: Right, it's the politics of interpretation. For a historian, the exploration of plurality can have a different narrative function. One question to ask, for instance, will be: how does a historian disrupt the illusive unity of a story, open it up for plural readings, and then apply a closure? This could be done in so many different ways. Let me here relate *Somanatha* to Partha Chatterjee's *A Princely Imposter*. Chatterjee tells the story of the missing Kumar of Bhawal, the appearance of a sannyasi who resembles the kumar, the incorporation of the stranger into the princely household as the lost prince, and then a prolonged legal battle over the person's real identity—the point to decide was whether he was an imposter or the real Kumar. In *Somanatha*, you feel the events described did happen, but their narrations differ. In *A Princely Imposter*, at the end of 456 pages, Chatterjee is still unsure whether the sannyasi who was anointed as the Kumar of Bhawal was the real prince who had gone missing. Chatterjee's object is not to discover who the sannyasi *really* was, or what *really* happened to the Bhawal Kumar. His object is to explore the limits of what can be known, and the radical uncertainly of the claims to truth that were being asserted in the court. The infinite legal recounting of the events becomes the site on which other histories are explored—of the social ties between the *raja* and *praja*, the personal bonds within the princely household, the workings of colonial courts and the ironies of legal wrangling, and the invisible politics of nationalism and colonialism. Chatterjee deliberately refuses to apply a closure to his story.

How would you as a historian look at this question of open-endedness and closure? How did you confront such questions in writing *Somanatha*?

RT: For me, the closure at one level can be the historical explanation, but at another to ask whether contemporary politics can use such an event as a central point of political mobilization. The historian is saying, in other words, that perhaps it wasn't a central event. There are obviously groups from the past for some of whom it was and for others it wasn't a central event. And, therefore, why are we building an ideology of politics on an event that was not central for everyone?

RJ: But that's the whole point, Romila, because you might have a multiplicity of interpretations of a historical event, but they might not end up with political implications. Once again, I go back to the Western canon. Take, for example, the story of the destruction of the library of Alexandria. We don't know if it happened or not. But we can see that in the Western canon it has become more fictional than political. But when we compare it with Somanatha, we don't see the immediate political implications.

RT: Yes. It would become important if it became the key to a political, or the core of a political ideology that was anti-Greek or what today would be called anti-Western. And, of course, since the library of Alexandria was not an Islamic library, it misses out on the politics of the present in Egypt and west Asia.

RJ: So, what's so important in the story in Somanatha is the rise of communal historical writing in India, which is the outcome of the colonial interpretation....

NB: An interpretation taken over by nationalists and reworked by communal groups....

RJ: Right. So the question would be: up to what point is this problematic going to be repeated in contemporary Indian history?

RT: Well, that depends on the politics of India. If there is a political ideology—parties with political ideologies that require this event—they will go on repeating a particular version of the event. And we do have this; we have the core of a political party that does so, and much more. And this will go on.

RJ: I was actually interested in ... it reminds me of one of your writings that I was reading, 'The Politics of Religious Communities', where you say that this notion of 'religious communities' as majority and minority didn't exist in early India.

RT: No, it takes shape with the British Indian census that started in 1872. And then after that, they start....

RJ: It's a modern invention.

RT: Yes, it's a modern invention.

RJ: Which also takes the shape of a communal feud and then the separations that we have. So there has been an evolution not only in Indian history writing under the colonial construction, but also in the way that Indians have been perceiving their own history all through time. Not only because of the traumas, but mainly because of the encounters with new ideologies or new notions....

RT: You mean in the last couple of centuries?

RJ: Yes, in the last couple of centuries. Nationalism has been one of the dominant concepts in political history in the past two hundred years.

Is There an Indian Marxism?

RJ: What other dominant concepts do you find with such an influence?

RT: Well, we could take the example of Marxism which is one that hasn't influenced this kind of historical thinking, but has influenced other interpretations of Indian history.

RJ: What type of Marxism? I'm interested because you always refer to Marxism. Is it the same kind of Marxism that we find in eastern Europe or northern Europe?

RT: No....

RJ: What type of Marxism? What are the elements of this Indian Marxism that you're talking about?

NB: Would it not differ from generation to generation over the last fifty years? I think in the 1950s and the 1960s, your generation was influenced by a Marxism that foregrounded the economic and the political much more than the cultural and social dimensions of society. They drew more upon the Marxism of Eric Hobsbawm, Maurice Dobb, and the Dobb–Sweezy debate on modes of production, and less upon E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill who acknowledged the constitutive function of culture. Historians like D.D. Kosambi were different....

RT: Let me speak about the area that I know. There were a lot of Marxist historians writing on modern and medieval history, but I would prefer to speak about early India.

As far as early India is concerned, I think of it as Marxism with two kinds of approaches. One was the Marxism of someone such as D.D. Kosambi, where he was taking the Marxist method and, in my opinion, using it creatively to ask searching questions in his analysis of many aspects of ancient history. Because he was not a historian by profession nor teaching in a university, one had to make a special effort to get to his writings.

He was not in the mainstream of historical writing at that time. University syllabi and reading lists did not at first often refer to D.D. Kosambi. Occasionally, maybe, but not centrally. But I think that he was the finest Marxist historian we've produced so far. The way he used Marxism appealed to me largely for two reasons. He dismissed what he thought was irrelevant in Marx and what was based on questionable data. With this approach I agreed. So Kosambi dismissed the Asiatic Mode of Production that was Marx's specific explanation of Asian history because it was not historically viable. This was the assessment of many Marxist historians. Kosambi went on to say that we should examine the modes of production that Marx proposes for European history such as slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, to see whether they are relevant to Indian history. He dismissed the slave mode of production for cogent reasons, but suggested that feudalism had possibilities. But even here he introduced innovation in the Marxist model and proposed feudalism from above and feudalism from below in the Indian context, and he explored other notions of feudalism. I may agree or disagree with some of his theories, as I do, but I find his explorations thought-provoking. Had he been writing today, I suspect he would have commented on the current debates here and elsewhere, not on a single model, but on the varieties of feudalism that are being discussed, or indeed in the debate on whether we should use the term at all.

The debate on feudalism in India is one example of how a theory of explanation was set out by Marxist historians, and after a few years was critiqued by other Marxist historians, and later the debate was joined by yet others, Marxist and non-Marxist. Even though the theory was not accepted by all historians, the quality and depth of the research required to take a position in the debate—and it was an extensive debate—resulted in both the emphases on new sources such as inscriptions in many parts of the country, as well as some new insights into the history of the subcontinent in that period.

What was earlier called 'a dark age' has been illumined as a result of the debate.

The application of the feudal mode as prescribed became a source of much controversy. Some tended to follow the prescription closely in the initial application, and then as the debate expanded, their views differed somewhat. Some suggested that feudalism of the kind that Marx had written about should be taken literally, others pointed to variations both in the definition of terms and in historical situations. Occasionally, there was something invigorating in this discussion of new perceptions, which one could take up and explore. It was provocative inasmuch as it forced one to a perspective of a period of history that on the whole had been treated in a different manner previously.

I've found myself more sympathetic to Kosambi's application of Marxism, even if I did not always agree with him. I think one obvious difference was that, among historians of ancient India, Kosambi himself was widely read both in the textual sources and in theories of historical explanation and in comparative history. He did not stop with reading Marx, but had an interest in some post-Marxist writings on history and culture. Quite apart from his linguistic skills that allowed him to read original sources, his reading of theoretical works was extensive, and it was stimulating to talk with him about what he was currently reading and why. His constant plea in his letters to Vidal-Naquet and others in Europe was that he be kept informed about what was being published that was worth reading. It was difficult in the 1950s to get imported books on subjects other than Indian.

Later, when I got to know something about those who were working on ancient Europe, I was surprised that historians were working on a range of aspects, some of which were new to us. For a Marxist approach to the Greco-Roman world, I tended to begin and end with George Thomson whose work on Greek literature encouraged much new thinking, but it was only later in the 1970s and the 1980s that I began to read others. The much later Marxist historian Geoffrey de Ste. Croix differed from George Thomson, although both claimed affinity with Marxism. My interest in historiography took me to Arnaldo Momigliano whose studies in this aspect of history led me to thinking about the Indian context. In the 1960s, whenever I mentioned my interest in historiography as a possible specialization to older Indian historians, they advised me not to waste my time on it. I remember a memorable conversation with Nurul Hasan at a seminar in Aligarh in 1968, when he thought that the relevance of historiography to the study of history was slight and advised me to work on more pertinent history. It was Momigliano a few years later who enthusiastically encouraged me to pursue historiography. It gradually became a defining interest not just in itself, but in some of the understanding I groped for in related themes.

I think my own interest in Marxism was not the result of reading *Das Kapital* from cover to cover—in fact I never attempted that and merely dipped into it when there was a reference in other readings. However, I did read some of his less daunting writings. Reading various historians and their work suggested useful questions for my kind of history as well. I particularly remember my excitement at discovering Nathan Wachtel's *The Vision of the Vanquished*. And yes, I found the arguments of some of these historians cogent and lucid. This was particularly so in much of what Eric Hobsbawm wrote. On ancient history I was interested in a mix of Marxists and non-Marxists such as Vidal-Naquet, and perhaps less so Geoffrey de St. Croix, and for myth and religion Jean-Pierre Vernant. I was also reading Moses Finley, who was possibly more Weberian than Marxist and had worthwhile insights into Greek epics. Reading French Marxist anthropologists such as Emmanuel Terray, Claude Meillassoux, and Maurice Godelier was helpful in formulating questions. Fortunately for us in the 1960s, American academics became interested in French neo-Marxism, so there were rapid translations of their writing into English and we were the beneficiaries. It was also from the 1960s that I made visits to Paris, attending UNESCO conferences on history and the social sciences, and subsequently was involved in the *History of Humanity*. Later, there were also conferences organized by the MSH, the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, also focusing on history as a social science. But more than all this, I was giving lectures at the Collège de France invited by the Professor of Sanskrit, Gerrard Fussmann. These gave me the opportunity for many worthwhile conversations with historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists—and all over some excellent dinners!

NB: Was it in the 1960s or the 1970s? The writings of the French Marxist anthropologists—Terray, Meillassoux, Godelier—became popular in India only in the 1970s, and Geoffrey de Ste. Croix was read only after his *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* is published in 1981.

RT: It started in the late 1960s and more or less continued into the 1980s and even later.

NB: I mean the reception in India. As for *Annales*, the impact of historians like Jacques Le Goff was felt only from the mid-1970s. Even Lucien Febvre was translated extensively only in the 1970s. Marc Bloch was widely read earlier. His *Feudal Society* was translated into English and published by Routledge in 1961, and his discussion of feudalism resonated with ideas being explored by Marxists in India.

RT: Their monographs in English were published in the 1970s and 1980s, but some of what they were saying came up in conferences earlier. My training in both Indian universities and SOAS was parochial in the sense that we did courses on history as told by the British, and even SOAS was not too open to the social sciences in the 1950s. Indian History as a social science was in its infancy and the only theory of explanation alternative to the conservative colonial was Marxism, which was regarded with suspicion by conventional opinion. We began hearing about European studies and social sciences in the late 1960s and started reading them thereafter. Those in the social sciences were discussing Marxist writing and these new developments emerged in part out of Marxist writing in the 1970s, which was when it was all being more fully talked about. So my interest was really through comparative studies. The questions I was asking were related to what the Sanskrit and Prakrit sources encouraged one to ask—and as an added perspective one turned to what the discussions on the nature of societies were suggesting. How does one examine a premodern society or a specifically ancient society in the light of the reconstruction of such societies in other contexts? Even though the answers were likely to be different, the questions could be similar, although at some point they would necessarily have to be different because the society was different. And asking those questions was one way in which one started considering different methods of analysis.

So it was not using Marxism as such, but it was an attempt to adapt and try out, as it were, facets of Marxist and other methodology to see what provided better explanations. I do remember conversations on the slave mode of production with Kosambi which were extremely illuminating. He was making a differentiation between his position on slavery in ancient India and the Marxist concept of the slave mode of production. That in a sense was what I was trying to understand, and I was trying to sort out my ideas after reading historical analyses of other societies that were dependent on slavery and where the pattern of slavery was diverse. Let me try and explain this. I did not accept slavery as a mode of production in India, but studying it as such made me aware of how caste and non-caste played a similar kind of role in the relationship between resources, ownership, and labour; and although one could not ask the identical questions, there was nevertheless the possibility of asking similar questions that would then trigger off other questions.

One of the other things that I must confess worried me somewhat was that when people stay very close to an ideology, there can be a tendency to nitpick. This was noticeable amongst historians. There were little niggling comments about a word or concept, here or there, being incorrect. At one level, I appreciated it, and occasionally might have corrected the usage in my writing, but when assessments remained at this level, I used to get slightly irritated because for me historical writing had a bigger canvas. So, if one was not too precise about the use of a particular word or phrase in English, but what one used was suggestive, this provoked me to think further. For example, I wrote about *arya–dasa* relations and after referring to how the Aryas defined the differences, I added that the Aryas probably thought of the *dasa* as the 'Other'. I explained that I was using it in the idiomatic way that it had begun to be used a few decades or so ago. I was criticized because such a term was not used for the *dasa* in the texts. I was well aware of the importance of exactitude, but felt that occasionally a touch of imagination could be helpfully suggestive, and as long as one made it clear that one was not quoting literally, but was in a sense expanding the connotation, it should be permitted.

NB: That's possibly because you didn't define yourself as a Marxist in the way that other people would have liked you to.

RT: Possibly.

NB: Possibly it was because you were reading much more widely and your intellectual interests were more catholic. Till the early 1970s, the dominant focus amongst Marxist historians in India was on the economic and political dimensions of society, changes in society were explained through economic causation, and the transition debate provided the frame within which all social change was understood. It was only from the mid-1970s that the social and the cultural were explored in new ways. This was partly to do with the fact that the younger generation was responding to the social history turn and the cultural turn within Marxism, and engaging closely with the writings of E.P. Thompson, Eugene Genovese, Stuart Hall, and Raphael Samuel. By the late 1970s, this shift created the basis of a deep tension in India between the Marxist historians of your generation and the younger generation of that time, reflected subsequently—in the 1980s—in the rage of the elders against Subaltern Studies.

New Schools of History Writing

RT: Possibly although there was more to that debate. It is true that I was certainly reading social and economic history other than that of Marxists. For example, I read some of the French *Annales* historians. This was social and economic history of a somewhat different kind, that I found helpful for my kind of work. The emphasis on ways of looking at the social history of non-elites was of interest, although I did not spend time on the study of mentalities. I had anyway read the earlier historians and sociologists such as Marc Bloch and Emile Durkheim as part of coursework. Now the relatively more recently established authors were being talked of, such as Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff and the writing pertained more to medieval than ancient history, but it was useful as another perspective on history. For me this was yet another way of trying to understand history as a social science. This was not in conformity with what some regarded as a Marxist analysis, but nevertheless did suggest ways of looking at social history.

And eventually it was good to have my position clarified for me! This was done recently by the leading Indian Marxist historian and a couple of others stating categorically that it was a factual error to call me a Marxist, that I was a 'scientific' historian, but not a Marxist historian.

NB: That's the definition of those who would like to see themselves as authentically Marxist. But I wonder how you saw yourself at the time, what was your self-definition? It seems to me that you were drawing on Marxism, but it didn't matter to you whether you were seen as Marxist.

RT: Yes, that didn't really matter.

NB: Because you're drawing on different traditions.

RT: I was interested in different methods of analyses including the Marxist, but I was aware that in my analyses I was drawing on these in varying degrees. There were some themes where I found that Marxist analyses provided clarity, there were others where analyses from a different perspective were more effective. And, of course, my concern was not with proving whether Marx was right.

NB: Or whether Marxism is right.

RT: No, I wasn't deeply interested in that.

NB: There was a creative use of diverse traditions....

RJ: Have you ever been interested in the *histoire des mentalités* as a historical school in France and more especially with the work of Michel Foucault?

RT: Well, only marginally.... I can't say that I was drawn to it....

RJ: Because there has been a complete change in French history writing, especially with the interventions of people like Foucault and ...

NB: Well, yes, from the 1980s Foucault's intellectual influence in India has been quite powerful.

RT: Well, it's been powerful for the younger generation of Indian historians, although perhaps less so, as yet, among historians of early India. But it wasn't drawn on significantly in my generation, except perhaps somewhat indirectly. I have read some of Hayden White and Foucault out of interest, but not so thoroughly as to use them in my work. And this for no other reason except that as I age I tend to get a little lazier about keeping up to date in my reading on theories of explanation. And also with aging and, therefore, more limited time, the priority in choosing what to read becomes a hard choice.

Working on early histories requires some familiarity with studies in other areas, especially in primary sources. It was in the 1980s that I came into contact with a number of Japanese scholars working on Sanskrit and premodern Indian history.

Kyoto had become a major centre of Sanskrit and Indology with scholars such as M. Hara, the two Yamazakis from Tokyo, and M. Tokunaga. The latter was among the first to digitize the *Mahabharata* and other texts. The floppies he gave me introduced me to an entirely new way of getting information from texts. Among historians, N. Karashima, working on south India, was prolific.

The comparative history of today focuses more on analysing cultures than on evaluating them. This possibly may reduce national bias although even analysis can be faulted. When looking at religion and society, apart from Marcel Mauss, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, one continued with Charles Malamoud on Vedic religion. When studying the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, one inevitably read Alf Hiltebeitel, Robert Goldman, John Brockington, Sheldon Pollock, Kevin McGrath and James Fitzgerald. Some of these scholars one had met when they came to India on visiting fellowships and spoke at our seminars, or when one lectured at American and European universities. Discussions of this kind of work, inevitably involved a renewed interest in the major scholarship of V.S. Sukthankar and his colleagues, and U.P. Shah and his associates, who worked on the critical editions, and others who had worked on the early sources, pre-eminently V.N. Dandekar.

But, together with this, there are younger Indian scholars working on early India whose work I find stimulating in terms of pursuing new avenues of thought. Some have been our students and then taught at JNU such as Kumkum Roy and Kunal Chakrabarti; others such as K.M. Shrimali, Y. Subbarayulu, Rajan Gurukkal, Uma Chakravarti, and Aloka Parasher-Sen at yet other universities and some at Delhi University. Obtaining books and journals published in the West is a major problem in being up-to-date in research. Their prices are horrendous, and are beyond the reach of individuals and, many libraries. But perhaps when the condition of libraries in India ceases to be as abysmal as it is, then we shall be able to keep abreast of publications worldwide.

One of the projects that I have been advocating, but without any success, is that there should be one library in the country for the social sciences and the humanities, that should subscribe to every academic journal that researchers in India need to consult, and such a library should purchase one copy of every book published outside India on Indian social sciences and humanities, as recommended by a committee of scholars. There is more than one such place for the sciences. This means that libraries do not have to multiplicate their holdings, that there will be at least one centre in the country where researchers can go to find what they require in journals, and that research in India on Indian subjects can keep abreast of what is going on elsewhere. Possibly, this access to current research the world over may mean that the quality of research might then take a quantum leap upwards on a larger scale. But it has been systematically impossible to convince any government or private organization to do this, since people still seem to think that research floats out of the researcher's head and does not require consulting the books that others write or their papers in academic journals. I sometimes wonder why those governing us are so dismissive of intellectual activity.

In terms of teaching and researching early Indian history, I have in the past felt that there used to be a greater scholarly focus on the earlier period and comparatively less so in terms of interpretations and explanations on the historical texts of post-Gupta times. This is now changing and these texts were among those that I had examined in my study of historical traditions and that I found had as yet unexploited possibilities. I am referring to inscriptions, royal biographies, and *vamshavalis* (chronicles). Because these texts can be more precisely dated and located, there has not been an endless obsession with their chronology, as has been the case with the epics and the *Puranas*. These texts lend themselves much more to the kinds of historical analyses that focus on the form of the state, the nature of authority, the role of the literature of imagination, and such like. Some of this has been attempted, as in the discussion on state formation in this period. Other aspects, if explored, could probably reveal far more of the political economy and the cultural articulation of those times, that at the moment tend to become rather stereotypical. But judging by more recent work, the focus on the post-Gupta period is emerging. It has a different kind of challenge, given the changes that occurred in the second millennium AD and the necessity of reliable regional history.

New ways of understanding primary sources are of course linked to new ways of reconstructing the past.

RJ: In the 1980s, you have the history of mentalities, private history, and the new school of the historians of the French Revolution.

NB: And the new generation of historians began opening up to the new currents of ideas that swept the intellectual scene—the cultural turn, the discursive turn, the semiotic turn, the linguistic turn, the textual turn. Historians began reading new critical studies in law, geography, art, literature, aesthetics, and anthropology.... Perhaps we can express all these shifts within an encapsulating category and refer to the critical turn. Historians, anthropologists, other social scientists and people working on literary and visual studies, in India and abroad, were reading Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, and others. What perhaps was common to them all is the idea that culture matters, discourses and images matter. They offered different ways of reading texts, images, signs, rituals, discourses; they posited different connections between power and discourse, between discourses and practices, between representations and society, differences that continue to be debated. But they helped open up new ways of understanding society and history.

I think some of you opened up to these ideas, but you continued to be sceptical of the critical turn.

RT: That is true. It's partly because at a certain point I had less time for new studies as I had so much reading to do of Sanskrit texts alone for my book on the early Indian historical traditions. Some of it I had done over the years, but nonetheless it required to be put together so as to see what the arguments were that were running through the texts. This required some re-reading and much thinking. My concentration moved towards reading the textual material and trying to see what I could make of it, and less on reading what other people wrote about other histories or their methods of historical analysis. I suppose I should have done this, but I didn't because I was focusing on the texts. When you're trying to give priority to certain texts, and there are many of them, even the initial selection becomes difficult.

NB: I would agree, though only partly. You're talking about your more recent books. As I said we cannot visualize *Somanatha* or *Shakuntala* being written by a historian in the 1950s or the 1960s. It's the 1980s' intellectual ferment—the narrative turn, the semiotic turn, the linguistic turn, etc.—as well as the new questions about historical truth, about the need to understand the structures of ambiguities and ambivalences, not just certainties that....

RT: The 1980s and the early 1990s had introduced these interesting ways of examining literary texts.

NB: I can't think of *The Past Before Us* being written in response to questions that appeared relevant in the 1960s. Your frame of reference has changed.

RT: There are some differences, yes. But I would not say that it has changed, as you maintain.

NB: And that change is influenced by the critical turn in historical studies.

RT: Well, I battled against Postmodernity, both because of their theories, but also because I found it so difficult to follow its language—and I still do.

RJ: So do I.

RT: But nevertheless, the little bit that I grasped about how one looks at a literary text did, I suppose, make me examine texts afresh. It is perfectly true that looking at the Shakuntala texts was partially influenced by the fact that I had done a similar exercise earlier with the Rama story, but that I also began to think in more diverse ways about a literary text as an object of history. I wasn't just looking at it only for direct information about history. It was saying something else, and that something else was becoming important.

NB: Well, yes. The impact of new traditions of thought, new questionings often happens imperceptibly, almost silently. Our terms of reference, questions of research, framing arguments, and vocabulary of expression shift slowly, without our knowing it, as we encounter new ideas and refigure them in our own ways. The critique of modernity has thrown up ideas that have now become part of the wider intellectual habitus. We accept many of them even as we define our difference from them. So these questions cannot be summarily dismissed.

Postmodernism, for instance, has helped us question the arrogance of modernity, its certitudes, its self-confidence, its arrogant desire to judge the world through its own categories, contrasting the savage from the civilized, the primitive from the modern, the irrational from the rational. It has made us aware of the need to understand other ways of being, other rationalities, other sensitivities, other moralities without primitivizing these plural worlds that modernity fails to comprehend. Marxists have always empathized with the working people and sought to understand their oppression and exploitation. But the culture and perceptions of the poor were usually judged from the standpoint of the modern. Such judgements cannot adequately grasp with empathy those lifeworlds that are seen as the other of the modern. The strong commitment to understand plurality—not just as textual practice—is connected to the critique of modernity's self-conceit. We need to question the universalist notion of rationality that modernity celebrates.

RJ: Or even truth.

NB: Yes. We need to question objectivist notions of truth, universalist notions of knowledge … how would you….

RT: Yes. I think I….

NB: I think you will agree that we need to understand the voices within a text, the visions that a text opens up….

RT: I think you have to have a dialogue with the text before you can understand it, and the dialogue has to be one of, 'What are you trying to tell me?' And you have to ask questions that might lead to some answers—suggestive answers. When it comes to making a statement, then I would tend to fall back somewhat on my older positivist enlightenment position.

NB: This is where I disagree. I think your interpretation leads you one way and your earlier anchoring pulls you another way. We can see that in your *The Past Before Us*, *Somanatha*, and *Shakuntala*. There is possibly within you an inner conflict. From the 1980s, your vision of history has changed in interesting ways, but you are uncomfortable with the implications of these changes.

Looking at the Past

RT: I try to argue, as I do in *The Past Before Us*, that you have to look at how people in the past looked at their past in addition to explaining it in the way we try to. When it comes to whether as a historian I accept what I think of as that version of the past, there I impose a critical inquiry on it.

NB: Have we not become sensitive to such notions of text reading particularly after the critical turn—that is from the late 1970s and the 1980s? Everyone influenced by the critical turn now talks of subjecting texts to scrutiny, analysing their internal tropes, and their modes of structuring. They talk about forms of representation, the conflict of perceptions, and the politics of production....

RT: Yes, more perhaps than before.

RJ: Which means you're a historian of your time....

RT: Without knowing it! So I've caught up with the 1980s and the 1990s. [Laughs.]

NB: In a certain sense, whether you like it or not, you have to acknowledge that postcolonialism and Postmodernism have opened up new ways of looking at the past.

RT: I'll concede that it has done some of that but in my case to only a limited extent.

NB: And I do feel that you're opening up to these newer ways of relating to the past, but you hesitate ... perhaps because of your own anchoring; perhaps because of a worry about how you will be perceived by your peers.

RT: It's also that, maybe....

NB: Amongst many historians I deeply respect, there is so much anxiety about relating to the newer critical ideas, so much hostility. It is one thing to develop a serious and engaged critique, it is quite another to be dismissive. Dismissiveness has a politics we need to understand.

RT: There is a politics to that, yes. My peer group may hesitate to accept what I have to say in *The Past Before Us*, although I am not so sure. Perhaps they will. But it's not just the peer group, it's also ... the exploration of history rooted in other kinds of more positivist analyses that convince me.

NB: Yes. The question is: how do we negotiate our anchoring, our embeddedness within specific traditions. Equally, how do we open up to new, critical traditions that question our assumptions? How do we learn from new ideas even when we define a critical distance from them? You have consistently—if cautiously—tried to move beyond....

RT: No. I may have moved beyond that, but my roots remain where they were. So every now and again, I say to myself: 'But!' And my friend Susan Reynolds tells me that 'but' is a vital word for historians! And then there are these roots.

RJ: You can't always betray your roots as a historian! Let us end this book with a last question. We tried to somehow accomplish this book by going over sixty years of your continuous work on ancient Indian history. Therefore, my last question would be—though I know you are a secular person, and you do not believe in reincarnation. But in case you had a second life, would you prefer to be again a historian? Or would you prefer to be a mathematician or an artist?

RT: Let me begin with a comment on how I see my function as a historian. I have in a sense functioned at two levels. The first that had priority was the function of an academic historian. The question I ask myself, and which is common to many like me, is partly an attempt to evaluate the quality of the history I have written, and partly whether I have contributed to the furtherance of knowledge in the discipline and to the comprehension of history as an intellectual discipline. The other level has been my attempt to try and bring the discipline of history into the public sphere, so that a larger number of people may have an understanding of what it means. I can only leave it to others to judge this.

Would I like to be a historian once again? The study of history is certainly much more challenging as a way of thinking about the past now than it was when I started off on my research sixty years ago. So if I am reborn and start off again twenty years or so from now, who knows what the parameters will have become? Nevertheless, I think I would like a change. My problem will be that of choice, as indeed it was partially in this life too. I would have liked to become so many things that I didn't know which to choose! This has been my problem, that every time I'm attracted towards a particular activity, I think 'Why didn't I become this instead of becoming a historian!' So I really wouldn't know. I wouldn't know what to choose. Basically, I think that I'm through with history for one lifetime, although I must confess that there are many links now being made through studies that pertain to history, but incorporate a variety of different disciplines that I would find so challenging to explore. I often think it would have been marvellous to have studied astronomy and indulged in leaps of imagination, but had

I been an astronomer, my imagination may not have leapt. I also often think of the fun that I would have had if I had chosen to work in botanical studies, as I almost did. Yes, all told, I think I would like to do something else if I have another life.

RJ: That's a good ending. Thank you, Professor Thapar, and also many thanks to Professor Neeladri Bhattacharya for his gracious and constructive participation in these conversations.

Index

Abrahamic religions, 223, 227
ahimsa (non-violence), 148–51
Ajivikas, 171
Akbar, ordering translation of
  Indian epics, 139. *See also*
  Dara Shikoh
Al-Biruni, 225
Alam, Muzaffar, 66
Alha kand, 101
Altekar, A.S., 48
Anantayatra (1985 movie), 285
Ancient India (Thapar), 196
anthropology, 200–5
anti-colonial nationalism, 153,
  198–9
Arabs
  appreciation of Aristotle and
    Socrates, 112
  trade with Saurashtra, 157
aranya (forest), 263
Archaeological Survey of India, 54
archaeology, 79–83, 136–7,
  199–205
Aron, Raymond, 63
artefacts, 75, 81
  significance of, 111
arya, 194, 196, 213, 216, 312
Arya Samaj, 7, 196, 216
Aryanism, 187–8
Aryans, 124–5
asceticism, 154, 164, 166, 172
  individual liberation and, 165
Ashoka, 110, 133
  between the ethical and the
    political, 163–8
  as '*Devanamapiya*', 168
  Gandhi and, 168–72
  history and charismatic
    literature, 178–7
  interpreting, 172–8
Ashokan pillar, 111
ashrama, 202, 286
Asia and Western Dominance (K.M.
  Panikkar), 49
Asiatic Mode of Production,
  132, 187, 307
*Aśoka and the Decline of the
  Mauryas* (Thapar), ix
atavikas, 171
Athenian democracy, 113

Babri Masjid, 196, 279,
  290, 295. *See also* Ram
  Janmabhoomi

Bantu oral tradition, 100
Barthes, Roland, 318
Basham, A.L., 18, 48–52, 55, 59, 117, 163
  as teacher at SOAS, 48
Berlin, Isaiah, critic of Marxism, xiii, 63
Berossos, 131
Béteille, André, 185
Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Bombay, 5
Bhagavad Gita, 6, 8, 274–6, 278–80
bhajan (hymn), 9, 15
Bhandarkar, R.G., historian, 48
Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 101, 237
Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi, 68
Bible, 6, 267–8
Black and Red Ware cultures, 215
Bloch, Marc, 203, 311, 314
Bourdieu, Pierre, 318
brahmana Catholics, 211
brahmanas, 138, 152, 168, 211, 222–3, 225, 228, 279
Brahmanism, 225
Braudel, Fernand, 247, 299
British, living with, 26–30
British Empire
  India without, 138–41
British India, 126, 134, 231, 305
British Raj, 13, 16, 44
Brockington, John, 238, 316
Brough, John, 50
Brown, Peter
  Kluge Prize for lifetime achievement, 198
  work on early Europe, 58
Buddhism, 9, 110, 164, 167, 172, 181, 220, 224, 228, 255
  Theravada sect of, 220
Buddhist monasteries, 168
Buddhists
  antagonism towards, 151–2
Buddhist Sangha, 165, 220
Burckhardt, on history, ix
Burns, Emile, 96

caitya (hall of worship), 222
Carr, E.H., 57, 86, 105
caste, 129, 145–7, 150–3
Castoriadis, 270
Castro, Fidel, 264
causation, 75, 123, 259, 313
centralized bureaucracy, 276
Chakrabarti, Kunal, 316
Champakalakshmi, R., 66
Chanakya. *See* Kautilya
Chanakya (TV serial), 278–9
Chandala, 229
Chandra, Bipan, 61, 66, 196
Chandra, Satish, 66, 196
charismatic literature
  history and, 178–86
charita (biography), 244
Charvakas, 171
Charvaka tradition, 123

Chattopadhya, B.D., historian, 66
Childe, Gordon, 53, 72
Chola Empire, 133
Christianity, 9, 13, 196, 211, 229, 255
Christians, 10, 222, 231, 233
civilization, 141–3
collective memory, 156–8, 160
Collingwood, R.G., 57, 94
Colonel Olcott, 216
colonialism, 4, 57, 137, 304
communal historical writing, 289–96, 300, 305
communal ideologies in India, 188–99
communalism, 25, 153, 211
concepts of time, 250–6
contemporary knowledge, 137
counterstory, 77, 118
Croce, Benedetto, 57
Cuban Revolution, 62–3
culture, 141–3
  in India, 146–8
  Sanskritic, 145–6
The Cyrus Cylinder, 108–9

Dalits, 147, 150, 172, 198, 206, 228, 233
dana-stuti hymns, 96, 204, 272–3
Dandekar, R.N., 101
Dara Shikoh, 139. *See also* Akbar
dargah (shrine), 8, 183, 222. *See also pir*
dasa, 195, 213, 312–3
de Certeau, Michel, 318
de Staël-Holstein, xiii
  Ancien Régime, xiii
de St. Croix, Geoffrey, 309–10
Delhi School of Economics, 185
Delhi Sultanate, 210
democracy, 276–7
derivative authority
  defined, 107
  in historical research, 106–12
Dharmashastra (Manu), 32, 138, 180, 185, 198, 208, 223, 252
Dipavamsa (chronicle from Sri Lanka), 52, 220
The Discovery of India (Nehru), 152
Dobb, Maurice, 306
Dravidian language, 146, 194–5, 216–7
Duby, Georges, 314
Durkheim, Emile, 314, 316

economic determinism, 175
Ellenborough, Lord, 294–5
epic
  historicity of, 239–44
  and history, 115–25
  looking at, 236–9
ethics
  politicization of, 169
ethnographers, 130
European colonialism, 49
evolution, 76
evolutionism, 203–4

fact, defined, 79
fascism, 161, 214
Fazl, Abu'l, 278
Febvre, Lucien, 203, 311
feudalism, 58, 127, 206, 307–8, 311
Feudal Society (Bloch), 311
fictive history, 93–4
Finley, Moses, 57–8, 96, 310
Firoz, Nur-ud-din, 292–3
Fitzgerald, James, 316
folk tales, 6, 265, 269
forgetfulness, 156
  memory and, 156–62
forgiveness
  retaliation and, 266–8
Foucault, Michel, 315, 318
French Revolution, 318
From Lineage to State (Thapar), 188, 203
Frontier Gandhi, 11

gana-rajya, 240
gana-sangha, 240, 277
gandharva marriage, of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, 285
Gandhi, Mahatma, 18–26, 178, 232, 264–5
  Ashoka and, 168–72
Garden of Eden, 254
Genovese, Eugene, 313
German Romanticism, 129, 284
Ghoshal, U.N., 48, 51
Ghurye, G.S., 185
The Gift (Mauss), 204
Godakumbara, Charles, 52
Godelier, Maurice, 310
Goethe, on Shakuntala, 284
The Golden Bough (Frazer), 73
Goldman, Robert, 316
Gopal, Sarvepalli, 66, 67
grama, 263
Greeks
  history and, 112–15
  in India, 112
  religion, 128
'*Gul-bakavali*', 9
Gunawardana, Leslie, 83, 187
Gupta dynasty, 110
Gupta Empire, 133
gurdwara, 14, 222
Gurukkal, Rajan, 316

Hall, Stuart, 313
Hara, M., 316
Harappan cities
  archaeology of, 217
  decline of, 218
  discovery of, 193
Harappan culture, 71, 194, 215
Hardy, P., 48
heroes and exile, 261–6
heroic narrative, 93
Hill, Christopher, 306
Hiltebeitel, Alf, 101, 316
Hind Swaraj, 232
Hinduism, 9, 49, 147, 167, 181–2, 194, 255, 279

- as part of social functions, 219–30
- Hindu Mahasabha, 231
- Hindu nationalism, 24, 99, 124, 153, 191
  - ideologues of, 230–5
- Hindu Rashtra, 124, 153, 191, 229
- Hindu religion, 152, 233
- 'The Historian and the Epic'
  - heroes and exile, 261–6
  - historicity of the epic, 239–44
  - levels of temporality, 244–50
  - linearity and evolution, 257–61
  - looking at the epic, 236–9
  - retaliation and forgiveness, 266–8
  - tragic drama in India, 268–80
- historians
  - and fictitious sources, 88
  - and historiography, 81, 87
  - interpretation of evidence, 82
  - objectivity in the work of, 83–7
  - and philosophy of history, 95–9
- historical fact, 79–83
  - creation of, 82–3
  - defined, 79
- historically reconstituted significance, 110
- historical narrative, 92–4
- historical reconstruction
  - and historical narrative, 94
  - and imagination, 94
- historical research
  - derivative authority in, 107–12
  - original authority in, 107–12
- historical trauma, 156–7
- historicity, 81–2, 103–7
- historicity of the epic, 239–44
- historiography, 87
- history
  - ancient, 80
  - charismatic literature and, 178–87
  - and epic, 115–25
  - and the Greeks, 112–15
  - as narrative of single voice, 89–92
  - oral, 99–103
  - pattern in, 76–9
  - philosophy of, 95–9
  - and political ideologies, 210–19
  - reliability testing, 80
  - as social science, 80–1
  - sources in, 87–9
- *History and Beyond* (Thapar), 188
- *The History of British India* (Mill), 126
- *Hitopadesha*, 32
- Hobsbawm, Eric, 55, 184, 306, 310
- Homer, 263
  - *Odyssey*, 261, 263
- Hopkins, Keith, debate, 58

House of Commons, 157, 294–5, 300
Humphries, Sally, 58
hypothesis, 91–2

ideology
  and objectivity, 86–7
imagination, 94
  and historical reconstruction, 94, 136
India, 59–62
  caste, 128
  communal ideologies in, 186–98
  culture in, 145–7
  Greeks in, 113
  Marxism in, 98, 305–12
  objectivity in, 87–9
  tradition in, 146–8
  tragic drama in, 268–80
  without the British, 138–41
Indian anti-colonial nationalism, 153
Indian art, 114–15
Indian Civil Service, 5
Indian classics, discovering, 31–2
Indian History Congress, Varanasi, 195
Indian kingship, 132–7
Indian Marxism, 306–13
Indian Nation, idea of, 143–6
Indian nationalism, 25, 71
Indian nationalist history, 132–6, 149
Indology, 68, 70, 80, 144, 316
intolerance, nationalism and, 150
IPTA movement, 285
Islam, 9, 13, 108, 138, 209, 210, 222, 226–7, 232–3, 299
Italian Fascisti, 214
itihasa
  and *kavya*, 117
  Mahabharata as, 115, 118

Jainas
  antagonism towards, 151–2
Jainism, 172, 224, 228, 255
Jane Eyre (Brontë), 31
Jataka stories, 101
jatis, 201, 207. *See also varna*
Jayawardena, Kumari, 44
JNU, 66–9
Jones, William, 90, 129–30, 284, 287
Judeo-Christian religions, 49, 224, 226

Kalhana, 230
  Rajatarangini, 118, 142, 230, 300
Kalidasa, 90, 282–4, 286, 288
  Abhijnanashakuntalam, 283
Kaliyuga, 257–8, 299
Karashima, N., 316
Kautilya, 252, 276–9
  Arthashastra, 48, 252, 276–8, 280

kavya
  and *itihasa*, 115
  Rajatarangini as, 118
  Ramayana as, 115
Khan, Badshah, 11, 16
Khan, Khan Abdul Ghaffar/Bacha Khan, Badshah Khan, 11–16
Khanqah, 222
Khomeini, Ayatollah, Iranian revolutionary, 264
Khosla, Romi, 45, 275
Khusrau, Amir, 139
Kim (Kipling), 31
King, Martin Luther, 187
kingship
  Indian, 132–7
kinship
  lineage and, 205–10
Kiribamune, Sirima, 53
Koestler, Arthur, *Darkness at Noon*, 65
Kosambi, D.D., 49, 96, 274, 306–8, 312
kshetra, 263
Kumarapala (Chalukya king), 293
Kurosawa, Akira, 302
  Rashomon (movie), 302
Kushana Empire, 133

Lal, Jhulay, 183
Last Judgement, 254
Le Goff, Jacques, 250, 311, 314
Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, 203
Library of Congress, 197–8
lineage
  kinship and, 205–10
linearity and evolution, 257–61
Lingayat, 226
literary imagination, 92–3, 288
London University, 36, 41, 59

Madame Blavatsky, 216
Mahabharata, 6, 9, 32, 73, 90, 96, 101, 103, 115–18, 139, 167, 201–2, 204, 208, 236, 262
  depiction of end-of-clan society, 117
  as *itihasa*, 115, 117–18
Mahadevan, Iravatham, 199
Mahavamsa (chronicle from Sri Lanka), 52, 220
Mahavihara, 220
Mahayana Buddhism, 255
Mahmud of Ghazni, 291–4
Majumdar, R.C., historian, 47, 48, 51
Malamoud, Charles, 274, 316
Mandela, Nelson, 265
Manichaeism, 255
Manu, 185, 198, 208, 252
Manu Dharmashastra, 32
Manu's code, 123
Marx, Groucho, 55
Marx, Karl, 132
  Asiatic Mode of Production, 187
  and Marxism, 62–5
  and Oriental Despotism, 132

Marxism, 56, 96–7, 155, 172, 174–5, 181, 222, 271
  in India, 98
mathas, 202, 215, 222
Matilal, Bimal, 266
Maurya, Chandragupta, 252
Mauryan artefacts, 167
Mauryan Empire, 133, 279
Mauss, Marcel, 96, 204, 274, 316
Mazhabis, 229
McGrath, Kevin, 316
Medieval India, 101, 196
Meenakshi, K., 67, 216
Megalithic culture, 215
Megasthenes, writing on India, 116, 131
Meillassoux, Claude, French Marxist anthropologist, 203, 310
memory, 155
  collective, 155–6
  communal, 160
  and forgetfulness, 156–62
  personal, 160
Mesopotamia, 71, 131, 217, 256
Mill, James, 126, 190, 316
Mirza, Sikandar, 11–13
Miyan, Ghazi, 298
mlecchas, 210, 213, 233
modernity, 320
  critics of, 122–3
  and transcendental reason, 122
Mohammad, Bohra, 289, 292
Momigliano, Arnaldo, 58, 309
monolithic communities, 192
The Morale Builders, 16
MSH (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme), 310
Mukhia, Harbans, 66
Müller, Max, 214, 216
Munshi, K.M., 295
Muslim League, 25, 231
Muslim nationalism, 153, 295
Mussolini, Benito, 194, 214

Namboodiripad, E.M.S., 99
Narain, A.K., 52–3
narrative
  heroic, 93
  historical, 92–4
nastaliq (Urdu script), 31
nastika (non-believers), 184, 225
nationalism, 151
  anti-colonial, 153
  intolerance and, 151
  religious, 152
National Movement, 178
Nazi Germany, 218
National Council of Educational Research and Training, 52
Needham, Joseph, 75
negative eschatology, 254
Nehru, Jawahar Lal, 23, 152, 170, 179, 265, 295
Nehruvian ideal, 33–6
New Testament, 10, 46

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 41
North-West Frontier Province, 2, 11, 27

objectivity, 83–7
  and ideology, 86–7
  in India, 86
  negative definition of, 86
objects, significance of, 111
Old Testament, 10, 46
oral history, 99–103
Oriental Despotism, 129, 130–2
  and Karl Marx, 132
  and kingship, 132–7
  Persian Empire as example of, 130–2
Oriental Institute, 101, 237
Orientalism (Said), 49
Orientalists, 126–30, 142, 274, 285
orthodox Hindus and Muslims, 209
Oxford University, 36

Painted Grey Ware culture, 215
Palat, Madhavan, 66
Palme Dutt, Rajani, Marxist, 65
Panchatantra, 32, 262
panda (priests who kept genealogies), 5
Panikkar, K.N., 66
Panjab University, 35, 41
Parasher-Sen, Aloka, 316
Parpola, Asko, 199
Parthasarathy, G., 66
Pasamda (sect), 170
Pasmandas, 229
The Past and Prejudice (Thapar), 106
Past and Present (journal), 58
The Past Before Us (Thapar), 90, 97, 103–5, 135, 188, 236, 320, 322–3
pastoralism, 128, 146, 154, 217, 258–9
Patanjali, 152, 228
Paumachariyam, 268
Penguin History of India (Thapar), 60, 144
Pereira, Leslie, 52
periodization, Mill's, 126–7, 190
Persian Empire, 130
Persians, trade with Saurashtra, 157
philosophy, 40–3
philosophy of history
  and historians, 95–9
pir, 8–9, 183. *See also dargah*
Plekhanov, Georgi, 163
political ideologies
  history and, 210–19
politicization of ethics, 169
politics, 15–18
  of multiculturalism, 169
  spiritualization of, 169
Pollock, Sheldon, scholar of Sanskrit, 316

positivist history, 89, 120
postcolonialism, 322
Postmodernism, 121–3, 221, 321–2
  and ideas of historiography, 123
Prakrit sources, 127, 311
Premchand, 31
Price, Simon, historian, 58
A Princely Imposter (Chatterjee), 303
Propp, Vladimir, 269
Pulakesin II (Chalukya king), 246
Pune University, 39, 41
Puranas, 104, 135, 177, 243, 247, 318
Puranic Hinduism, 167
Puranic theory of the Mahayuga, 255

Quit India Movement, 19
Quran, 6, 13, 157

Raychaudhuri, H.C., 48, 51
rajasuya, 204
Rama katha, 90, 221
Ramanujan, A.K., 265, 269
Ramayana (Valmiki), 6–7, 73, 101, 103, 116–18, 202, 220–1, 236–9, 242, 246, 273, 275, 278
Ram Janmabhoomi, 196. *See also* Babri Masjid
Rashomon Effect, 296–300, 302
ratha yatra, 289
Ratnagar, Shereen, at CHS, JNU, 66
Ravana, 117–18, 268
real history, 93
recollection, 156
reliability
  and history, 80–1, 88
  testing and archaeology, 81
religions and storytelling, 6–11
'religious enterprise', 138, 153, 202, 223
religious fundamentalism, 231
'religious labels', 11
religious nationalism, 25, 153, 191, 193, 199, 231
religious pluralism, 170
retaliation
  and forgiveness, 266–8
Reynolds, Susan, 58, 105, 323
Rig Veda, 96, 204, 216, 272
Roman Empire, 132, 133
Roy, Kumkum, 158, 283, 316
RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), 194
Rudé, George, 184
Rudolph, Lloyd, 186

Saberwal, Satish, 67, 186
Said, Edward, 49
Samuel, Raphael, 313
Sanatan Dharma, 7
Sangh Parivar, 234, 295
Sankalia, H.D., 60, 239
Sanskrit, 127, 138–40, 142, 145–7, 151

Sartre, Jean-Paul, 43
Sastri, Nilakantha, 48, 51, 174
Satavahana Empire, 133
Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar, 24, 230–1
Scheduled Tribes, 201
Science and Civilization in China (Needham), 75
The Second Sex (de Beauvoir), 43
secular environment, 11–15
sedimentation, 109
Semitic religions, 223. *See also* Abrahamic religions
settled agriculture, 155, 209, 258
Shah, Arvind, 185
Shah, Reza, 218
Shah, U.P., 316
Shakuntala (Thapar), 97, 188, 272, 281–5
sharia, 210, 223
Sharma, R.S., 52, 196, 274
Shasri, K.A. Nilakantha, 48, 51, 174
shifting agriculture, 258–9
shramanas (non-Brahman sects), 152, 170, 184, 225, 228
Shramanic tradition, 224
Shramanism, 225
Shrimali, K.M., 316
Siddiqui, Majid, 66
Sikhism, 9, 228
Sikhs, 222
The Singer of Tales (Milman and Lord), 100
Sircar, D.C., 48, 51–2
Smith, Vincent, 47, 57, 114, 132, 164
socialism, 62, 64, 65, 127, 206
social science
  history as, 80–1
Somanatha (Thapar), 89, 97, 157, 160–1, 188
  centrality of the event, 301–6
  Rashoman Effect, 296–300
Srinivas, M.N., 186
Staal, Frits, 272–3
storytelling, 6–11, 95
stupas, 222
Subbarayulu, Y., 316
Subbulakshmi, M.S., 285
Sukthankar, V.S., 239, 316
suprabhatam, 14
svadharma, 275
'Syndicated Hinduism', 229, 279

Tagore, Rabindranath
  on nationalism, 283
  personification of spirituality by, 287
Tale of Genji (Murasaki), 37
Tambimuttu, 41
  editor of *Poetry: London–New York*, 41
Tarn, W.W., British scholar, 57, 114, 197
temporality, levels of, 244–50
Terkel, Studs

  Division Street America, 100
  Hard Times: The Oral History of the Great Depression, 100
Terray, Emmanuel, 310
Thapar, B.K., 54
Theosophists, 190, 216
Theravada sect of early Buddhism, 220
Therigatha, 180
Thompson, E.P., writings of, 57, 306, 313
Thomson, George, 309
time, concepts of, 250–6
  in Judeo-Christian tradition, 49, 225, 227, 254, 256
Tokunaga, M., 316
tolerance, 148–9. *See also* ahimsa
Toynbee, 246, 248
tradition
  in India, 148–51
  and non-violence, 148–51
tragic drama in India, 268–80

Uberoi, J.P.S., 185
UNESCO, 310
University of Chicago, 186
University of Delhi, 39, 57, 61–2, 67, 174–5, 185, 271
University of Edinburgh, 6
Upanishad, 139
urbanization, 200, 209
utilitarians, 126–30

Valmiki, 73, 221–2, 282
vamsha (bamboo/cane plant), 245, 251
vamsha-anu-charita, 135, 177
vamshavalis (chronicles), 140, 318
vana, 263
van der Sprenkel, Otto, 55
Varma, Mahadevi, 41
Varma, Raja Ravi, 285
varna, 207. *See also jati*
Vedas, 96, 190, 204, 216–17, 225, 272
Vedic Brahmanism, 225
Vedic Sanskrit, 216
Vedic texts, 133, 157, 193–4, 216–7
Vernant, Jean-Pierre, 310
Vidal-Naquet, Pierre Emmanuel, 270–1, 309–10
viharas (monasteries), 202, 222
Vishnu Purana, 177

Wachtel, Nathan, *The Vision of the Vanquished*, 310
Weber, Max, 62, 177, 187, 316
Western philosophy, 40–1
White, Hayden, 315
Williams, Monier, 284
Wittfogel, Karl, 132
Witzel, Michael, 274
World Sanskrit Conference, Kyoto, 50
World War II, 19, 22

Yugas, 254, 257

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